

# ***Eyeopener***

*drawing landscape near and far*

**Abstract**

This paper is about learning to see the world anew – but also about doubting and qualifying that newness. Drawing upon a practice-led, art-geography collaboration, in which *en plein air* painting and drawing was the primary medium, it aims to further extend understandings of the affective spatialities of landscape. The paper offers a sequence of extended reflections upon the phenomenologies and materialities of the perceptual experience of landscape drawing. After initial discussion of this work's location and germination, a first substantive section investigates the spaces of the canvas itself. Subsequently, the core and culmination of the paper consists of an account of this form of landscape experience, organised around two headings: *drawn into the world* and *so near and yet so far*. The concluding section of the paper consolidates its arguments in respect of theories of landscape specifically, and also comments upon the paper's relation to current work in creative geographies.

**Keywords:** Landscape Drawing Painting Phenomenology Creativity Distance

## 1. Introduction.

This paper is about learning to draw, sketch and paint outdoors, *en plein air*. It aims to show how working through these practices, and reflecting upon them in writing, can be a means of extending current understanding of the spatialities and affectivities of landscape in geography, and in cognate disciplines such as cultural anthropology, visual studies and performance studies. The paper is thus about learning to encounter and see landscape anew. But it is equally about working through and qualifying that sense of newness. I am especially interested here in further investigating landscape as a particular form of affective spatiality, a visual and haptic experience which, from the outset, enrolls human and non-humans, hands and eyes, one and many, the lived and the abstract. To anticipate later arguments, this is a sense of landscape as perhaps sometimes near and intimate, but as always nonetheless in some way distant.

I am writing in the first person, but the wider project I am drawing upon here was strongly collaborative and dialogical in nature, and this is a co-authored paper. This project was a year-long collaboration between myself and a contemporary visual artist, Catrin Webster, in which, among other activities, we undertook together a practice-led inquiry into the relationship between *plein air* painting and drawing, and conceptualisations of landscape, visibility, materiality and relationality<sup>1</sup>.



**Figure 1. source: author photo**

When I say practice-led, what I mean is that, over the course of a year, we regularly sat together side-by-side outdoors drawing and conversing; talking about technique, about light, shadow, line, depth, colour and so on, but talking together also about differing accounts of painting and drawing from visual arts traditions, from within cultural geography, and more widely from phenomenological, poststructural and new materialist writings. If I adopt a first-person voice here, it is firstly to try to convey more directly the *in situ*, dialogical and experiential character of the work we did. Secondly, this mode of expression somehow also seems best suited to chronicling what was in part a process (for me) of dawning realisation, and sometimes even of revelation, but sometimes also a set of experiences characterised by doubt and frustration. A sense of cohering and then fragmenting, of things becoming clearer but then obscure again. Perhaps, as Derrida (1993) argues in *Memoirs of the Blind*, there is always something simultaneously revelatory and doubt-ridden about visual discourse.

That sounds speculative. But our collaborative work was, in its origins, also quite pragmatically oriented, and impelled by specific disciplinary contexts. Over the past ten to fifteen years, cultural geographers, anthropologists and arts practitioners have explored diverse forms of landscape practice and performance – and beyond the widespread example of walking (see for instance Wylie, 2005, Ingold and Vergunst, 2008, MacPherson, 2016), these include landscape practices and mobilities as diverse as angling, cycling, climbing, running, swimming, scuba-diving, writing and train travel (Spinney, 2006, Watts, 2008, Bissell 2009, Brace & Johns-Putra, 2010, Eden & Bear, 2011 Straughan, 2012, Barratt, 2012, Cidell, 2014, Rickly, 2017, Foley, 2017). Landscape has also in the past ten years become a distinctive venue for reflections on memory, change, narrative, spirituality and therapy (e.g. Conradson, 2005, Pearson, 2007, Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009, Daniels and Lorimer, 2012, De Silvey, 2012, Wylie, 2017). But it seemed to us, at the time we began, that the practice of painting and drawing was an omission from this lengthening list of studies, especially given the decisive associations between landscape and visual art. So, we set out with a claim that the visual conditions of landscape painting and drawing merited fresh consideration as a corporeal and material practice.

Of course, as Harriet Hawkins' (2015) study of 'composing place and page' notes, there is already a very rich tradition of writing about drawing. More pointedly, there is a tradition of finding *in* drawing an engaged, situated form of knowing which offers the possibilities of new, maybe renewed, senses of place, world and self. Hawkins references in particular writing by the critic John Berger, and the anthropologist Michael Taussig, in this regard. Equally, studies of drawing and painting are of course legion within fine art practice and education itself, and they have also re-emerged anew recently, in the context of arguments for the value and

cogency of practice-led research and inquiry (see for instance Barrett & Bolt, 2010). Another notable set of recent studies, by Tim Ingold and various collaborators (see Ingold, 2007, Hallam and Ingold, 2007, Ingold 2011), ambitiously positions drawing as an exemplary form of line-making. For Ingold, in a world composed of ongoing lines and pathways, this makes the activity of drawing exemplary of knowing and being *per se*. In this context, the recent work of artist-geographers such as Veronica Vickery (2015) and Sage Brice (2017), exploring drawing in distinctive ways as vital material encounter with non-human worlds, potentially suggests that practices of drawing and painting are experiencing a distinctive moment of renewal as modes and territories of enquiry within cultural geographies. This paper therefore seeks to extend and complement these still-emergent studies of how drawing might illuminate senses of landscape and spatiality.

Beyond questions of landscape and drawing specifically, this paper also addresses, and can be situated within, the rapidly-growing body of geographical work now exploring collaborative forms of practice with artists, and using different types of creative approaches, techniques and genres. The definition, status and potential of creative geographies has been widely discussed in recent years (see for example, De Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017, Hawkins, 2015, 2017; Miller, 2017, Banfield, 2016, Williams, 2016, Eshun and Madge, 2016) in tandem with the consolidation of art-geography collaboration as a key research venue, technique and outcome across human geographies (as a sample, see Foster & Lorimer, 2007, Merriman and Webster, 2009, Garrett, 2010, Davies & Scalway, 2012, DeSilvey, Ryan & Bond, 2014, Gibbs, 2014, Paton, 2013). In these context, two initial issues for this paper are, firstly, the precise nature of the collaboration undertaken here, and secondly, the implications of an untrained

geographer seeking not just to practice visual art techniques, but to use them as occasions for conceptual writing and reflection.

Perhaps the essential point to note here is that Catrin came to this collaboration as an educator and practitioner already well-versed in theories of landscape and perception, and with considerable experience of working in partnership with academic researchers. Among diverse projects, she had for example previously collaborated with cultural geographer Peter Merriman (Merriman and Webster, 2009) on an exchange-paper discussing her practices of painting Welsh landscapes in mobile settings (on foot, and by bike, van and train). She had also completed a practice-based PhD thesis, entitled *Intimate Distance* (Webster, 2010), chronicling and interrogating her own evolving practice. So, if the phrase ‘art-geography collaboration’ might potentially conjure an image of quite different worlds and backgrounds colliding, that was certainly not the case here. We already shared considerable common ground in terms of knowledge of landscape theory and the histories of landscape art, and through the research process we focused upon and honed a specific shared interest in the phenomenologies and materialities of spatial practice and perception. In this sense, the specificity of our collaboration perhaps lay in its conceptual orientation as much as the differences bridged between us.

But in contrast to Catrin’s expertise across domains, I came to the work as an untutored novice in terms of painting and drawing as modes of exploring landscape. For Marston and De Leeuw (2013, and see also Banfield, 2016), this presents a critical challenge for geographers adopting and practising creative techniques – of art, writing or otherwise – in their work. One risk, they suggest, is of a negligent or superficial treatment of creative practice that fails to properly acknowledge labour, skill and talent on the part of artists and others,

and that presumes that researchers can readily acquire and deploy creative skills. I will return to these issues in conclusion. At the outset, I can note that of course the intention here was never to 'become' a painter in the sense of acquiring a professional level of proficiency. Our collaboration was experimental in the basic sense that I tried out some key *plein air* mediums (specifically watercolour, ink and charcoal drawing). But at the same time, I *did* come to this work with proficiencies and interests of my own; with almost twenty years' experience of academic research on landscape. Equally I arrived with an established set of interests in the possibilities of 'creative' writing and description in cultural geographies. At times, and with certain audiences, I would even go so far as to describe first-person writing and sensing of landscape as my form of 'practice'. Therefore, as much as practices of drawing and painting were encountered on their own terms, they were also discussed and explored from the start in terms of other practices, writing especially, and in the context of theories of landscape, visuality and phenomenology.

These points raise another in turn – a major question: how can a research approach which is practice-led interface with more 'standard' formats involving academic writing, conceptual reflection and retrospective discussion of experiences and events? A full response to this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. A more immediate and specific reply, however, involves thinking about the *temporalities* of research, and this is a salient point in this case, because there is a pause of almost three years between the end of the initial phase of inquiry, and the completion of the written paper. Thus the paper you are reading *is* retrospectively framed, in a way that locates it with particular debates regarding geography and creativity, for example. Again, I will comment further on the time-framing of this work in conclusion. But at the same time, I would say it is also important to not draw overly sharp lines between differing forms



of inquiry and practice, or to sequester domains of creativity and criticality in a way that potentially prohibits and excludes certain forms of collaboration.

I will end this introduction with an example of this shuttling back and forth between different registers of practice and knowledge. We had already been working for about three weeks when I finally remembered Stephen Quoniam's (1988) article, '*A painter, geographer of Arizona*'. I couldn't recall its argument from when I'd first read it, years ago - all I could remember was what it looked like. A series of images in which densely-scribbled lines of note-like but illegible text stacked up like geological strata, interspersed with coloured sketches of the canyoned depths and too-blue skies of Arizona. It wasn't accessible online for me; I had to go to the library for the hard copy. Sad to say, it was the first time for many months that I'd been down into the basement rolling stacks where the periodicals are shelved. It was probably worth it even just for the memories that the scholastic smell of the place conjured, but I felt a rarer sense of clarity and certainty when I found the right volume, and read Quoniam's opening statement: '*The art of painting represents for the geographer, perhaps more than for another individual, the search for an image of the world as a sort of ecstasy of spaces*', (p.3).

As soon as I read these words, it felt like I had caught hold of a lifeline. 'An image of the world as a sort of ecstasy of spaces' – *exactly*. Quoniam's paper felt like an injunction. *This* was the emergent experience of drawing and painting I now had to somehow capture in writing, and put to work conceptually.

In what follows, I will work through a roughly chronological account of how my work with Catrin Webster evolved. I will begin by writing about where and how we worked, and that will

lead on to an opening discussion of the particular materialities of painting and drawing *en plein air*. Subsequently, the core and culmination of the paper consists of an account of the phenomenologies of this form of landscape, organised into two longer sections of writing: *drawn into the world* and *so near and yet so far*.

Throughout the paper, several examples of our painting and drawing are shown. Except for one, these are mine. These images hopefully offer an alternate level of communication, but I will note they are chiefly illustrative, and they are not specifically discussed in the text.

## **2. The Hoopern Valley**

On the first formal day of collaboration, we carried chairs and satchels full of painting materials across the campus at Exeter, and walked down into the Hoopern valley. I had chosen the valley as a first outdoor locale because it was conveniently nearby, and yet also in a sense secluded and remote. As things turned out, while we drew and painted through various landscapes in and around the south-west of England, we returned time and again to the Hoopern valley.

I was never able to completely shake off a sense of unease about this choice, though. And choice is maybe already too strong a word, it was more a habit or routine we fell into, not least because pragmatically it worked, with Catrin visiting for a week at a time every three weeks or so through the year. The Hoopern Valley is a small, steep river valley on the edge of the University of Exeter main campus. It is picturesque, lushly landscaped, and, like many valley gardens found around the coasts of south-west England, extensively planted with exotic shrubs, plants and trees. But it is screened off from the surrounding open campus by lines of trees, by the general lie of the land, and then hidden yet further by its own reclusive

aspect. I strongly suspect that many, perhaps even most of the people driving up every day into the large adjacent car parks don't even know that the valley is there. The four paths that lead into it – two at the top end of the valley, one halfway down, and one more at the bottom – have the look of paths that might lead you astray. They quickly dip and curve out of sight, discouraging most casual strollers. Not that there are that many of these in any case<sup>ii</sup>.



**Figure 2. source: author photo**

You can see it is almost too-easy to lapse into an evocation of the Hoopern Valley as though it were some otherworldly secret garden. At the same time, it has an overly-manicured, almost kitsch quality. Catrin once compared it to a set from the original 1960'S series of Star Trek, when Kirk and Spock are repeatedly beamed down onto the surface of some stagey and unconvincing alien world. The key point here is that the valley is just as *designed* a space as any art gallery, as any kitchen. It has been designed and is maintained for visual consumption as aesthetic landscape - and hence my unease. The valley is already in some ways 'painterly'; certainly it is pleasing to the eye in terms of conventional Western and European taste in

landscape. More specifically still, it was a present-day articulation of a certain English garden landscape aesthetic, right down to its valley morphology and exotic planting. How could I look to freshly engage ideas of landscape and drawing, when already the valley felt like a pre-judged notion of what 'landscape' might entail?

As the research progressed, however, these concerns were at least partially allayed. The valley offered varieties of light, colour, angle and distance; in this way it afforded a process of learning to perceive spaces, relations and horizons in particular ways. It was multiplicitous in terms of materialities and luminosities. It was a portal, not a prison. And from another perspective - Catrin's - my worries were needless, because, in the end, venue was not the sole determining factor. The practice itself of looking and drawing, was equally crucial, as a set of embodied dispositions and skills, and as an illuminating means of producing and relating interiority and exteriority, self and world. Whether this happened indoors or outdoors, in the city or the country, somewhere striking or mundane, was, at least to some extent, a secondary issue. And given its classically-landscaped atmospherics, I could almost argue the valley offered something akin to laboratory conditions for a study of painting, drawing, landscape and perception. Almost. And if the valley was a kind of idealisation or, better, *abstraction* in terms of landscape, then this gave us both an inheritance to chafe against, and a useful corrective to any naturalistic claims that might surreptitiously creep in – any sense, I mean, that we might see our work as trying to access some previously unmapped marrow of the lived (see McCormack, 2012), when to draw was in some ways precisely to grapple with *lived abstractions*, as I will discuss further later.

If there were wider constraints and suppositions at work, they were most plainly to do with being *outdoors*, and in the *daylight*. Painting and drawing normally presuppose some

visibility; landscape *is* light, as Denis Cosgrove (2001, p.110) once put it. But of course light is not something simply either on or off, present or absent. The lighting of landscape is always a matter of varying intensities and atmospherics, as Morris's (2010) study of night-walking, Martin's (2011) discussion of fog and Edensor's diverse studies of light and darkness (e.g. Edensor, 2013, 2017, Cook & Edensor, 2017) all illustrate in different ways. This was one occasion, for example, where in discussion Catrin was impelled to reconsider starting suppositions. The lesson for me was not to take a certain level of light as a norm or a neutrality that I could assume, and *look through*, like a window. It is not an original insight, but one of the first things I grasped in *plein air* painting – and even in a way remembered, having written on similar ideas before (XXXX, 2006) – was that light was condition, medium and subject all in one, in this context an intensive level according to which you looked *with* and not *at*.

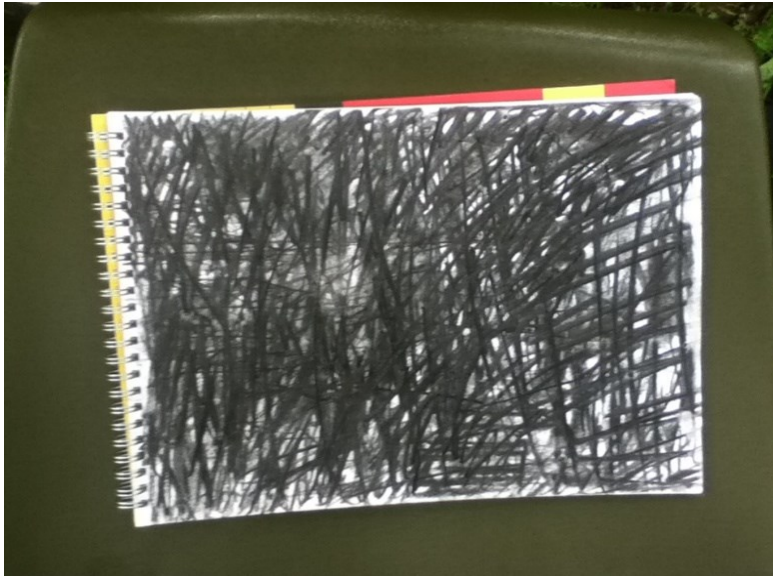
Equally, the fact that we drew and painted outdoors, *en plein air*, had to be reckoned with and worked through. While painting and drawing have always taken place out in the open, *en plein air* – outdoor painting and drawing there and then, in response to the chosen scene - is strongly historically associated with romantic art and later with impressionism in nineteenth-century Europe and North America. Arguably partly enabled by the development of ready-mixed paints and more portable brushes, sketchbooks and canvases, it is also associated with particular values and beliefs. Most notably, a *plein air* approach is culturally and historically entwined with the rise of romantic beliefs in the importance, for art, of direct, sensuous connection with the natural world (see Callen, 2000, 2015). With this emphasis on naturality, directness and immediacy, *en plein air* has a specific association with Impressionism, and with its focus on the sensory registers of light, shadow, colour and atmosphere. As Stewart (2011, p.408) argues, 'sketching outdoors championed a new process of artistic creation predicated

on bodily experience in the world, proximity to concrete forms, and a privileged authenticity of expression’.

Catrin Webster is in no way a *plein air* purist – often drawing indoors, drawing images from TV screens, and using mobile phone footage as source material for drawing. But our routine landscaping in the Hoopern Valley, and our inheritance of a *plein air* disposition did in time give shape to questions for me regarding immediacy, distance, impression and abstraction with respect to drawing landscape. That is the eventual direction of travel for this paper. Firstly, though, particular questions of materiality were to the fore.

### **3. The matter of the canvas.**

At the outset, *en plein air* painting involves the eyeing and handling of materials unfamiliar and often awkward to the novice. Brushes, charcoals, colours, inks – and equally new postures, durations, rhythms. But before all else, I first saw the canvas itself. Perhaps I had imagined in advance a rather rarefied form of activity; the practical experience of watching and moving in a new mode that might cast fresh light on some longstanding preoccupations: depths, horizons, vanishing points. In other words, I assumed that painting and drawing would be about the lining and voluminosity of spaces from the start. But it became clear straightaway that these issues in fact presupposed a starker, blanker question. The fresh, unobtrusive blank canvas, there in my hands.



*Figure 3. source: author photo*

And this had nothing to do with blank spaces, absences, or anxieties. Partly because lesson one, especially with charcoals, is an exuberant scrawling and infilling, only on the basis of which more subtle questions of shape, volume and relation might emerge. But mainly because even before that the canvas materialised for me as a vivid and textured presence in itself. I realised how much I had been living in an impoverished paper world – one of cheap notebooks and, at best, laser-printer quality A4. And more still of my everyday visual and textual life was already happening behind glass screens – an increasingly tabulated life of delicate yet attenuated tactility, in which every touch, every tap and swipe, was ever more haunted by a sense of being so near and yet so far – a sense of failing, in some way, to touch. Rich and dense and interwoven, the canvas was already a work of art to me, already something to hold and behold.

The canvas absorbed me as much as it did the highly-diluted watercolours I practised washing across it. In one way it seemed like a tactical space to navigate and negotiate, like a chessboard, say; in other words, a kind of battleground. Or better yet like a snakes-and-ladders board, given that novice painting and drawing is mainly composed of temporary

triumphs and disheartening falls. Or perhaps most of all the canvas was best understood as a kind of camera lens or viewfinder – the canvas as a framing and focusing device, of course. But in this capacity it never simply sat ‘between me and the landscape’, like some static filter or mediator. Instead, the canvas was as active and ever-present an element as the ball is in a football match. And afterwards – I mean over a year later, when looking at the images now framed and mounted – it seemed strange that it was, in a way, no longer there. That a landscape of sorts had arrived instead to take its place.

So, the materialities of painting and drawing were firstly apparent not in terms of palette, colour, or medium - the thirst of the watercolour, the strength of ink, the shine of charcoal – but instead *via* a certain materialisation of the space of landscape, in the canvas form itself. This format was akin most clearly to a material process like containerisation – I mean the establishment of an industry-standard format for organising and transporting the visible world. Akin also to the box-like materiality of a camera – which is a room, of course, a little dark room (Webster 2010). A camera is thus also a container of visible worlds. A canvas may well work in a similar way. Something precisely mundane – worldly – an item here and now *in* the world, but there to capture, at least in principle, all the world, itself included. A blank space only at first sight, the canvas already abstracted the landscape in the same way a map might, or a spreadsheet: all right angles and cross-hairs.

#### **4. Drawn into the world**

Painting sometimes draws you in – as perhaps the above discussion of the canvas shows. You generate and occupy a small but intense space. The world contracts and focuses, space becomes a hood or bubble; within its shelter you find somewhere to draw. Here, the canvas



does become, for a while, the 'object of painting', as Foucault (2011) called it in a study of Edouard Manet. In other words, a sense of an 'external' reference-point – the 'landscape' beyond – goes temporarily missing. Everything happens up close in-between your eyes, fingers, brushes, the sketchbook/canvas on your lap (we never used easels).

But another aspect of this drawing-into-the-world is experienced, at least initially, as a drawing-out, an outward pull. A centrifugal rather than centripetal spacing, one that takes you out of yourself, *via* an intensely visual and also postural form of contemplation. This contemplation may be accompanied by an 'out-of-body' sense of *displacement out into* the things and the relations that comprise the environing spatial field around you. It is hardly novel to note that painting and drawing are as much about watching, and paying attention to the world, as they are about mark-making on the canvas. However it seems to me that this type of watching is not exactly predatory, not hawk-like. More often it is meditative, drifting or dilatory. In that sense it is as much temporal as spatial. In part, what you *see*, what you lose and find yourself within, is the passing of time.

In his now-classic accounts of 'skill acquisition' Hubert Dreyfus (e.g. see Dreyfus 2004) describes how learners of activities as diverse as playing chess or driving a car pass through a series of stages, from novice to expert. Without endorsing the specifics of these accounts, or claiming to be reaching for a stage such as what Dreyfus calls 'competency', I could see, in my initial experiences of painting and drawing, connections to some of the affective states he relates. The flat-footed way in which one applies initial rules and suggestions. The inability of the novice to see the wood for the trees – to appreciate situational, emerging possibilities, and to improvise thereof. How elation at successfully learning a given aspect of technique soon gives way to frustration at its limitations.

The first few weeks of painting and drawing under Catrin's tutelage felt like a kind of initiation into new styles of attending and contemplating. At times, though, they also felt to me like a kind of return - specifically to early literatures on embodied visual perception (e.g. Gibson, 1950). I could see again now, as I looked without drawing, the dissonance between the rectangular frame of the canvas and the kidney-bean oval of my own defocused binocular stare, with its faint nasal shadow. I remembered that our eyes are always mobile – whatever augmentations and proxies may yet come, there is not, for now, a static human gaze. I appreciated in a new light that there are cores and peripheries in seeing – areas in and out of focus - unlike a conventionally painted landscape, where everything is in focus all at once; *this* is a kind of unreality for human perception. I saw the co-dependence of sight and blindness – I mean the blink of an eye, the incessant microseconds of not-seeing that are the pre-condition of seeing itself. Normally of course this happens without volition, but I know that as you read this you will become suddenly more aware of your blinking, feeling its discomfort and seeming unnaturalness. Yet it is an unblinking, ever-open eye that would be completely blind.

To learn to paint and draw is thus, on the face of it, to learn *a new way of seeing*, and in so doing to be drawn out, drawn in – drawn *closer* to visible objects, patterns and relations, to be aware of them anew – this is what I am trying to say. Looking at the canvas, and looking out; looking between them: these were exercises in closer attention, immersion and absorption. From what I have read and understood, this is almost an established narrative concerning the lived experience of drawing, in which drawing is understood in terms of intimacy, beckoning and revelation, such that when you draw, so you are *drawn into the world*.



**Figure 4. source: author photo**

In one of his final essays, *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty (1969, p.xx) wrote that ‘it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth [...]the painter’s vision is an ongoing birth’. And this sense of a kind of perpetual nativity, of a perception always starting afresh, still resonates strongly for many in terms of approaching the experience of painting and drawing. There *is* a sense of newness, and of a newly-minted fascination with the world, that is attendant upon learning to draw, and to watch in a way that facilitates drawing. The experience of drawing is an eyeopener. This, I think, is what Quoiniam (1988, *op.cit*) meant when he spoke about the painter’s discovery of ‘an ecstasy of spaces’. And it is what Hawkins’ (2015, p.255) also indicates, when she argues that ‘to draw is to discover, to be led to see, to be drawn into an intimate relationship with the object’.

Hawkins goes on to speak of drawing as a ‘whole-body feeling attuning me to the particularities of a place....to sit in one place and look was not just to look at a tree, at part of a landscape, but was to become attuned to being in that place’ (*ibid*). And perhaps there *is*

something distinctly phenomenological about drawing. Or more exactly, just as phenomenology can seem to require the arts (painting, poetry) in order to most lucidly express itself, so researchers and practitioners sometimes find in phenomenological concepts and language an apt vehicle for articulating the experience of drawing and painting. In extremis, however, this can become a romance of painterly experience as a certain dream of phenomenology fulfilled and realised. For example, take Scheldeman's account of the botanical artist, Roger Banks:

'It is precisely Roger's personal aesthetic of landscape, his creative, multi-sensory embodied being-in-the-world that tells us about seeing from within....it is all about engagement: he does not talk about the need to stand back to take in the landscape: rather he is viscerally immersed in it' (Scheldeman, 2012, p.35)

If, here, there is a risk of drawing being reduced to a sort of nebulous oneness in which neither drawer nor drawn seem to retain their potential for emergence or distinction, then a more nuanced approach could set out from the insight that Alphonso Lingis (1998) elucidates from Merleau-Ponty's later work – namely that we see and sense *with* the world around us. In other words, that which we may at times experience as 'ours', as a personal or 'inner' experience, is actually conditional upon our being always already situated amidst a definitively more-than-human world of perception. If I sit and watch the light as it falls among and through the intricate branches of a tree, and at the same time I try to mark and render this on the canvas, much more is happening than just 'my' looking and handling. A range of forces and agencies are at work, it can be argued. This is what Tim Ingold (2010) argues, when he concurs with Paul Klee's declaration that 'art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible'. For Ingold, this 'making visible' is not a creative power resident solely within the

painter's body. Instead a making-visible occurs through a particular attunement of the varied sets of material forces and flows (of air, light, sentience) that comprise the landscape. Thus, drawing 'is a question not of imposing preconceived forms on inert matter, but of intervening in the fields of force and currents of material wherein forms are generated' (Ingold, 2010, p.92).

We thus need to understand drawing as akin to manifold other world-crafting practices. In other words, drawing is a lifeline; a mode of ours and the world's ongoing unfolding. In this way it becomes clear that drawing and painting have nothing to do with the representation, from without, of a separate reality, rather they are better understood as the world's expression of itself from within itself.

But if there is a problem here, if I have a problem here, it is drawn from experience. My initial sense was analogical— I felt that trying to paint and draw was like trying to learn how to play a musical instrument like a guitar – something else I have tried to do. In other words, painting and drawing requires the laborious and painful incorporation of various embodied skills, rhythms, proficiencies and dispositions, and certainly a particular type of hand-eye coordination, a particular mode and quality of attention. This is the manual labour of painting - by which I mean the impossible attempt to hold things still, to not shift in your seat even in the slightest, because if you do – or rather *when* you do – then your next *look out* will be out of kilter; everything will have shifted, both on the canvas and over there. The entire landscape will have quivered and twitched, like a dreaming animal, and then settled down again, except not exactly in the same place.

To draw and paint is therefore to experience landscape as something continuously out-of-sync. For all that you are drawn *in*, and beckoned, and made witness to a new interplay of spaces and things, light and shade, this is not necessarily accompanied by a sense of immersive wholeness or of harmony. Catrin Webster can sit for hours on end before the same scene, with the fluency and control of the skilled practitioner. But I am fidgeting after fifteen minutes, I need to stand up and walk into the scene I'm beholding. With painting and drawing there is, it seems to me, a certain beady eye that's required. Painting *is* a craft, after all, by which I mean also that it is something crafty, it requires guile and cunning. At other times, I felt that the hand-eye coordination required was almost like that which you would need to be good at table-tennis – to be able move quickly but assuredly, to and fro, side to side, rapidly glancing and dabbing here and there.

You need to be quick, and alert. Like a kitten watching a bouncy ball. We had a new kitten at home while I was in the early stages of working with Catrin. I hope you will also know what I mean by a *bouncy ball* – the type that on a hard floor bounces madly up and down. And, as it does so, the kitten's head also bobs comically up and down – because she keeps looking *right at it*, she has it fixed in her eyes, all the better to suddenly swipe it, in a movement through the air as confident and precisely on the mark as any brushstroke.

But I don't have the visual acuity and reflexes of a kitten. When I draw I must work all the time with error and approximation. I could scope this out to something like a general claim: you must learn that the very first mark you make, wherever you make it, and with whatever implement and in whatever medium, must be a mistake, must be mistaken. The mistaken or erroneous initial mark on the canvas is, I might argue, the one and only basis for any subsequent painterly 'resemblance', or at least concordance, resonance, affinity – or

integrity. This at least has been my experience to date: an ongoing dissonance between hand, eye, scene and canvas. A jigsaw puzzle where the various shapes and spaces won't interlock properly. The constant accumulation of myriad tiny errors, amplifying and ricocheting through the space of the canvas. Error is integral, is a condition of possibility for integrity. Only *via* error, or through being errant, through wandering off course, does any sense of surehandedness and sustained trajectory emerge.

Or at least I told myself this – that, just like steering a car or a bicycle, painting and drawing involved constantly making minute alterations of course and direction. Just like walking too. Except the problem is I often could not sustain it. I forgot to look up, to look back and forth, to watch as quickly and carefully as required – to follow the ball as it bounced around. I got annoyed with myself, and with the landscape. It is not as if I was ever aiming for a level of technical proficiency that would allow me to reproduce the scene in a naturalistic or photorealist way. But if drawing *is* drawing in, drawing-closer, a becoming-with the world, then why did it often feel like an impasse?



*Figure 5. source: author photo*

I wondered if it was going too far to talk about seeing the world anew, but a new realm of light, colour and shadow *was* opened up, at least to begin with. Looking intently, with the intent to draw, initially meant that every shape and surface was differentiated and enriched. Like Craig Martin (2011) when fog-bound, received ideas of close and far, measure and horizon, were disrupted. But unlike in that case, they were disturbed here by a sort of hyper-visibility, a superabundance of sights. The notion of landscape as a certain kind of spacing-out and relating of self and world seemed stale, for a while, in the face of glittering and beckoning visual complexities. Prismatic and multitudinous spaces. Like I could touch them – the spaces themselves, not just the things that occupied and interrelated them – like I could see the spaces themselves. And still something of this remained afterward. But, as weeks became months, and until, after the winter break, we started drawing again on an icy January morning in the Hoopern Valley beneath a toothpaste-blue sky, so this initially revelatory sense of being



drawn into the world, drawn closer, increasingly seemed a dead-end, and maybe even despite itself a blindspot.

### 5. So Near and Yet So Far

It took another scrap of text, this time happened on by chance, to shift my direction and emphasis again:

Like a dog.

Cezanne says

that's how a painter

must see, the eye

fixed & almost

averted

(Sebald and Tripp, 2004, p.51)

This micropoem by W.G. Sebald is one among many collected together in *Unrecounted*, his collaboration with the visual artist Jan Peter Tripp. On the facing page, a pair of eyes, clearly human, and drawn in Tripp's customary hyper-realist style, stare back at the reader. And I became preoccupied by the idea (whether Sebald's or Cezanne's) of 'the eye fixed and almost averted' – and by the model of watching and knowing, the relation of visible and invisible, thus implied. I began to think that it was a mistake to look to the accuracy and dexterity of a cat's eye, or a table-tennis player's. Perhaps a kind of hang-dog look would be more apposite.

To see like a dog: to take in the world through a shifting and always somewhat anxious glance, not a crystalline and confident gaze. To approach visual landscapes like a supplicant, with a cringing aspect - like a whipped cur. To fail to meet them in the eye. And most of all, to somehow look, and look away, simultaneously. To see and not to see.

As anyone with experience of drawing will know, one of the first things that visual artists learn about are *negative spaces*. In-between spaces might be a more exact term – the apparently empty spaces, gaps, intervals, that lie in-between two objects: between two trees in a valley, two cups on a table, beneath a chair in a room. It is only by watching at the edges of these discreet yet ever-present absences that any sense of substantive objecthood – that which art instruction calls ‘positive space’ - emerges in lucid fashion. You never just see *things*, objects, in an isolate, autonomous fashion. You certainly cannot draw them as if you do. It is only by perceiving the gaps between the branches that you can articulate the shapes and spacings of a tree.



**Figure 6. source: author photo**

A halo of absence thus frames and forms all that is apparently present and concrete in the visual landscape. This apparition of 'negative space' is readily evident in the art of sculpture – for example, as Paton (2015) discusses, it becomes a force-field of charged potential, a vital vacuum at the heart of things, in some of the sculptural work of Barbara Hepworth. In Rachel Whiteread's cast-work, by contrast, it's through the making-concrete of voided space that this constitutive power of absence becomes apparent (see Harrison, forthcoming).

Through the second half of my time alongside Catrin Webster, this was another eyeopener for me – that the visible world was like a net or a sieve, ninety-nine-percent composed of gaps and holes. And yet it was spun rich and strange precisely out of these nothings (see Metcalfe, 2001). It seemed to me, looking and looking away, watching apparent intervals become the structuring articulation of apparent objects, that the visual landscape of painting and drawing was the most relational space possible. I encountered a world now composed entirely of interpositions and relays, a morphology of interrelations beyond any objecthood. There were no already-outlined objects, plotted and contained within a pre-established and vacant spatiality. The regularly-staggered spaces of a conventional visual landscape, moving from foreground through middle distance to background, were complicated if not compromised by what I now perceived as a decisive interplay of absence and presence, seeing and not-seeing, in the visual field - one which turned everywhere into elsewhere. In her highly-insightful account of orientation, Sarah Ahmed (2006, p.2) writes that 'bodies take shape through tending towards bodies that are reachable, that are available with the bodily horizon'. But in addition, they are configured by irremediably distant reaches of spatiality – by a quality of absence and distance integral to landscapes.



**Figure 7. Catrin  
Webster, *Winter Trees*,**

Around this time, at the start of spring, I also began to look afresh at Catrin Webster's own work and practice. Side-by-side, I saw that this was characterised by a particular acuity of attention and rapidity of response. A landscape quickly crystallised on the canvas as she worked, it's at-first-glance untethered expressionism becoming, on closer inspection, a confident and precise exploration of the Hoopern Valley's shapes, lighting and depths. Here, the impress of the visible was vividly apparent, but not in any 'naturalistic' pictorial idiom. As the critic Jonathon Crary (2000) notes, the irony of *en plein air* impressionism is that it is *this* style, precisely premised upon *in situ* attention to the landscape, that actually leads in time to the fragmentation and breakdown of both traditional perceptual space and viewing subject. Crary pinpoints Cezanne's later work as a crucial moment in this, discussing it as a passage from impressionism *en route* to the abstract art of the early twentieth-century. In practice, so to speak, the closer and more intensely you look, the more a familiar world of shapes and spaces starts, in your eyes, to arpeggiate rather than chime. And this

fragmentation and dislocating (I came to see) *was* the lived experience of landscape, and not an obstacle to overcome in search of some more soulful connection.

The lived landscape was already a kind of abstracting and distancing. As Derek McCormack (2012, p.717) writes, in academic contexts, abstraction is most commonly understood to be ‘underpinned by a logic of distancing in which a necessary condition of understanding the world is the act of separation of subject and object’. And for this reason, the abstract is often associated with rationalist knowledge, either coldly remote from its ground-targets, or scholastically untethered from lived worlds. But McCormack argues that this bracketing of the lived and the abstract from each other in fact only limits our ability to comprehend what we call ‘lived experience’. He argues instead for ‘the necessity of abstraction for any effort to think through the processual materiality of lived space’ (*ibid*, p.719).

This could be one way to understand the process becoming visible within Catrin Webster’s drawings, which seemed to reach a point where the lived and the abstract almost touched one another. We talked this through, and when the time came to present our work, we gave the exhibition the title, ‘*Lived Abstractions*’. This dyad of lived and abstract could be conceived as another way of expressing anew the inaugural poststructural insight that lived experience can never be completely present-to-itself; that it must be incessantly ghosted by elsewhere and elsewhen. Just like the landscapes we watched, the experience of watching was equally never at home with itself.

The point for re-emphasis here is that the experience of drawing could never be a return to some original naïve moment of seeing. Merleau-Ponty (1969) was mistaken, I would argue, when he spoke about some of Cezanne’s landscapes in this vein. For me, learning to watch

and move in a new way *was* an eyeopener, but not a baptism. If, on the one hand, drawing reveals a kind of absorbing glitter of relationalities, an 'ecstasy of spaces' as Quoniam said, then on the other – in the interplay of presence and absence, in looking and looking-away - it can seem as if the entire visual field is composed of myriad vanishing points. Of recedings and distancings. A world in some ways entirely out of reach. This was not the cold distance of a calculating gaze, or the plotted distances of a map. It was not even the distance of alienation or estrangement from the world. It was a distance alive between me and the things I watched and drew, and among those things themselves. An enabling and essential distance in many ways: the landscape was distinct and apart from us as the very condition of our being able to approach it and depict it. This was how self and landscape related in the act of watching and mark-making – a coming-closer and a drawing-away, an echoing withdrawal. *So near and yet so far* – if I could offer one summation of the sensed spatialities of painting and drawing, that would be it. *So near and yet so far*, because we live in a world that never coincides with itself, let alone with us. *So near and yet so far*, because an immeasurable distance in-between haunts every measured and rendered space.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have talked about drawing and painting as an 'eyeopener'. The decision to use this term was an early one, and it stuck. But nearing the end, it seems a touch dubious. Eyeopener – as if, before, I was blind. As if now my sight had been restored. In the end, for me, there *was* revelation of a kind. Having experienced doubts about how geographers, using ideas of embodiment, materiality and performance, invoked the feeling of lived and affective spaces, the experience of drawing landscape, near and far, disclosed the possibility that you *could* attend to lived experience without succumbing to a form of phenomenological

naturalism. Drawing *is* expressive and provisional. It *does* take form as a new and ongoing line amidst a world of flowing lines, an 'ecstasy of spaces'.

But drawing is also always in some ways blind, if I may use this term. As Derrida (1993) observes, the very point of inscription on the canvas is itself invisible, the point where the mark-maker makes its mark, the point of marking and of making, the very crucible of all these vital flows and forces, is a kind of blindspot. Equally as he writes, and as I have seen for myself, you must always be either looking at the canvas *or* the object of drawing, you can never see both at once, and therefore drawing is always in this sense a blindspot. There cannot be a viewing subject who is not themselves a vanishing point. My specific conclusion would therefore be that the sense of landscape in painting and drawing is at once both near and far, both immersive and relatable, yet also necessarily distant and unreachable. The phenomenology of *en plein air* landscape is a matter of distancing and diffraction as much as of connection and immersion; drawing hides and it distances as much as it locates and envisions. You open your eyes to find yourself newly attuned and affected, yes, but in a landscape that remains as far away as ever.

That is the conclusion this paper offers for landscape theory in geography and beyond. More widely, what might be gained here in terms of art-geography collaborations, and the renewed promises of creative geographies? As noted above, at the formal end of our collaboration Catrin and I staged an exhibition on the Exeter campus of her images and mine, entitled *Lived Abstractions*. I wrote a brief essay to accompany the exhibition, which contained the embryo of some ideas discussed here. That was in late 2013. Afterwards, the account of the research was developed further in a set of presentations and seminars. But at the same time, there was also a sort of ebbing and letting-go. Through 2014 and 2015 both Catrin and I were

absorbed by the demands of new roles and positions. It was only later in 2016 that I returned more determinedly to the material, and crafted the paper into a full draft.

I noted this particular temporal framing in the introduction. It is important in this case, because it is relevant to ways in which this work might be positioned and received. Through the research's fallow years, numerous new articles debating a creative turn in geography appeared. These came to cast a kind of backward shadow over our work, requesting responses to questions that had not emerged, or seemed salient, whilst we were in process. I had embarked upon the research on the premise that engaging with drawing and perception in tandem with an accomplished artist would make me a better landscape geographer, and might sharpen insight in that regard. I hope that this paper testifies to that ambition. For Catrin, on reflection, the collaborative experience involved regaining a certain kind of critical distance. What has remained most visceral is the way practices of thinking through drawing, and thinking through writing, complement and inform one another. And so, in response to Marston & De Leeuw's (2013) concerns regarding the risk of amateur academic appropriation of professional skills, I would say that the benefits of engagement with creative techniques will nearly always outweigh this. Moreover, as this paper has hopefully shown (and see also, for example, Lea (2009), Patchett (2016), Mann (2017)), it is the very process of inquiry and skill acquisition itself that often yields the sharpest insight and critical reflection in practice-based research. A particular point to draw here is that, in frequently being a learning process, the practice of creative geographies will sometimes have faltering or unconvincing outcomes. Some experiments must fail. Many of my drawings were rapidly binned. The eventual insights gained into the phenomenologies and materialities of landscape here were hard-won; the passage from visual to textual expression episodic and challenging.



Most recently, two leading practitioners of the creative turn in geography have highlighted what they see as the absence of explicitly critical goals and orientations within creative geographies. De Leeuw and Hawkins (2017, p.307) argue that:

“when geographers are *practicing creativity* – as opposed to studying the creativity of others – the critical and creative seem to come together less often. Creative geographies are often taken up in order to create geographic understandings about the world and or to reflect on geographical scholarship...rather than to critically intervene in the contemporary or historical power imbalances so often the focus of much critical geographical scholarship” (*original emphasis*).

De Leeuw and Hawkins make a strong point in noting how ‘the creative’ has come to be sequestered within particular cultural geographical idioms and venues. But this paper now concluding *is* an explicit attempt to further geographical understanding through creative practice, and reflection upon it. The intention was always to establish a dialogue between the practice of painting and drawing, and concepts and arguments from work in geography and elsewhere on landscape, experience and perception. As Catrin remarked in subsequent correspondence, we talked as much as we drew. One outcome is thus an academic article in which the practice of drawing, and the drawings themselves, prompt fresh encounter with questions regarding the phenomenologies of landscape experience. Is this critical? For me, the wider critical task continues to accrue and evolve around a possible thought of landscape, sensed and dwelt-upon, that nevertheless eludes the homely and exclusive languages of belonging, communion and identification (see Wylie 2016). In pinpointing a particular form of distance – *so near and yet so far* – as emergent and sensible within experiences of landscape, a critical avenue potentially opens towards wider re-appraisal of how forms of distance configure within our worldly relations and engagements. We are not done yet, I think, far

from it, with understanding the geographies of embodied landscape encounters, and with the challenge of their critical and creative expression.

### **Acknowledgements:**

This research was funded by a Leverhulme Trust Artist in Residence award; award no. AIR-028. Many thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for their support.

This paper has evolved over time, and we have many people and audiences to thank. Firstly, thanks to our mutual friend, Prof. Elena Isayev, of the Classics and Ancient History Department at the University of Exeter, through whom we were first introduced, in the context of an AHRC 'Beyond Text' Research Network, 'De-Placing Future Memory'. Thanks also to members of the *Cultural and Historical Geographies* research group at Exeter, who have followed and commented on this research as it has evolved.

At different stages, elements of this research were presented to Geography research seminar audiences at Bristol, Oxford and NUI Galway, and also at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) in Cambridge. A paper further drawing on and developing this work was presented at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference 2013 in London, in a session entitled '*New Frontiers of Geographical Knowledge and Practice? Exploring Creative Methods and Encounter*'. A paper on this research was also presented at the 5th Biannual Nordic Geographers Meeting 2013, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, in a session on *Critical Geography and Visual Methodologies*. Finally, two invited conference keynotes drew substantially upon this research; firstly at the Centre for Excellence in Cultural Theory Annual Conference, University of Tartu, Estonia in November 2013, and secondly at a conference entitled '*Between Space and Place: Landscapes of Liminality*' held at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland in June 2014. We would like to thank in particular the organisers, chairs and audiences

of all these events for their kind invitations to speak, and for audience and participant feedback on our work

Lastly, we would like to thank four anonymous reviewers, and *Transactions* editor Simon Naylor for their in-depth engagement with and critique of our work.

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<sup>i</sup> Catrin Webster was based in the Department of Geography at Exeter as Leverhulme Trust Artist-Residence in the academic year 2012-13, Award number AIR-028

<sup>ii</sup> Since this paper was written, plans have been developed to build student halls of residence on a field abutting the Hoopern Valley to the east side. It is difficult as yet to judge the impacts this would have on the valley, although pedestrian through traffic would undoubtedly increase.