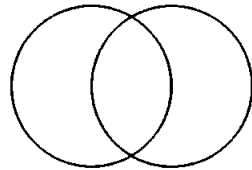


**VESICA**

**USING NEOLITHIC BRITISH RITUAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE AS A  
MODEL FOR MAKING CONTEMPORARY ART.**



**BY**

**MICHAEL PEARCE MFA FSA Scot**

**A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfillment for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Dartington College of Arts**

**February 2007**

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## **Abstract**

Can the creative practices of British Neolithic art and architecture be used in the making of contemporary art? This dissertation describes my practice making works of art based on the Neolithic model, presented in a gallery setting and occasionally in the landscape. The creative process is grounded on research into prehistoric British art and ritual architecture and records my process of understanding the work of ancient Britons as a framework for the concurrent process of making new objects for display. Without extensive research and direct experience of the Neolithic art and architecture I would not have been able to create the responsive work that has grown from it. I visited dozens of sites in England, Scotland, and Ireland, immersing myself as much as possible within them, on them and around them; I breathed the damp air and sheltered from the rain under their roofs; I ate in them, I touched, measured and aligned them. I visited them in daylight and at night; summer and winter; on solstices and ordinary days; sometimes by car but mostly on foot. I read copious texts by academic archaeologists in my effort to get into the minds of the people who made these places and got to know the archaeological scene well enough to deliver a paper at the Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference in 2005, taking questions from distinguished Professors Julian Thomas and Mike Parker Pearson.

My research included the types of space that remain and explores patterns that exist within the structures, interpreting, based on the archaeology, how the places Neolithic people made might have been used in ritual; in addition it includes an exploration of the decoration and phenomena of the spaces. The process of understanding the Neolithic shaped and transformed my creative practice and profoundly affected my practice of

making art and introducing a shamanic theme into the way I share it. The work I make is therefore a response to the ancient practices of the men and women, a collection of objects that a Neolithic artist might make today.

Finally the thesis is concerned with identifying three strategies used by contemporary artists; Reconstructing, "Artefacting", and Responding to Neolithic spaces, then documents how these three strategies are used as models in the creation of the practical work that corresponds with the written work. Issues of presentation are explored at some length, born of the dilemmas I experienced when making decisions of where and how to show people what I had made.

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I have had the academic support of many people, but none more than my supervisor Dr. Edward Cowie, whose guidance has been invaluable. Kate Paulsen and Whitney Haroldson have helped to scan and sort out photographs and records and keep me organised, particularly Kate. Dr. Julia Fogg, Dr. Lesley Finlayson, Dr. Fred Tonsing and Dr. Shirley Mullen gave me great advice in the early stages of writing and managed not to laugh at my appalling first efforts. Dr. Mary Anne Owoc, Dr. Merryn Dinely, Dr. Aaron Watson, Dr. Erlyne Whiteman, Lynn Creighton and Dr. John Blondell have been partners in some wonderful discussions both in the flesh and in cyberspace that have helped to develop ideas in the creative and written work.

The staff of several libraries have been more helpful than I had any right to hope for, particularly Richard Buchen of the Joseph Campbell and Marijah Gimbutas Archive at the Pacifica Graduate Institute Library, Lala Badal and Britt-Nicole Peterson of the Pearson Library at California Lutheran University, and Ruth Angelos and the staff of Westmont College Library.

I am thankful for the financial support of the Hewlett Grant Committee, the CLU Faculty Development Fund and the Westmont College Professional Development Grant

Committee without whose generosity I could never have visited Ireland, the Orkneys or searched the Ridgeway's chambered mounds or the Avebury complex for traces of Neolithic art.

My gratitude is extended to several photographers who have kindly allowed me to use their images to illustrate the text when my own pictures have been lacking. I have listed their credits with each image.

Finally, I am grateful to the Society of Antiquarians of Scotland for making me a Fellow of their hitherto noble Society and for the provision of the entire collection of the Proceedings of the Society on the web, and I am thankful to the Amtrak train company for my ocean-side dolphin-spotting mobile office, which was seldom late, only derailed once when we hit a pick-up truck, and within whose carriages I wrote at least half of the pages of this dissertation.

**Author's Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the Author been registered for any other University award.

This research was supported with a part-time fee bursary and other financial assistance provided by Dartington College of Arts.

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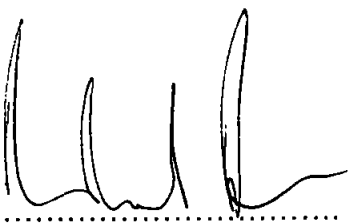
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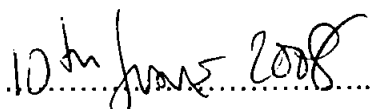
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## VESICA

### USING NEOLITHIC BRITISH RITUAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE AS A MODEL FOR MAKING CONTEMPORARY ART.

*"It is not that we prefer time-worn bas-reliefs, or rusted statuettes as such, nor is it the vestiges of death that grip us in them, but those of life. Mutilation is the scar left by the struggle with Time, and a reminder of it— Time which is as much a part of ancient works of art as the material they are made of, and thrusts up through the fissures, from a dark underworld, where all is at once chaos and determinism."<sup>1</sup>*

The vesica piscis is the intersection between two identical circles drawn so that the circumference of each crosses the centre of the other. The history of this shape can be traced back to ancient Greek use as a symbol of Venus, then early Christian mystical use as a symbol of Christ; at its simplest it represents the intersection of the transcendent divine with the earthly world. It is used as the symbolic title of this thesis because it neatly illustrates the intersection of ancient and modern, illustrating the timeless principles of many practices described here. It also represents the meeting between the mystical and practical aspects of the work, which is grounded in the most ancient expression of the divine found in solar geometry and expressed with the most elemental of materials.

There are three dualities in the thesis work that are worth noting immediately: academic research and creativity, art and artefact, and ancient and post-modern practise. These dualist tensions are not resolvable, and it is the exploration of the vesica between them that provides the inspiration of much of this work. In mystical thinking

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<sup>1</sup> Malraux, 1951, 635

duality is immediately followed by the triad, because two things cannot exist without relationship between them also existing; I made work that was deliberately positioned in the often ambiguous and complex area between the dualities. Consequently, one might see all of my work existing on a continuum made of these dualities. For example, some pieces have more of a contemporary flavour, while other pieces could dwell very comfortably in prehistoric Britain. In order to explain this relationship of ancient and modern ideas I have described my work as “contemporary Neolithic” art.

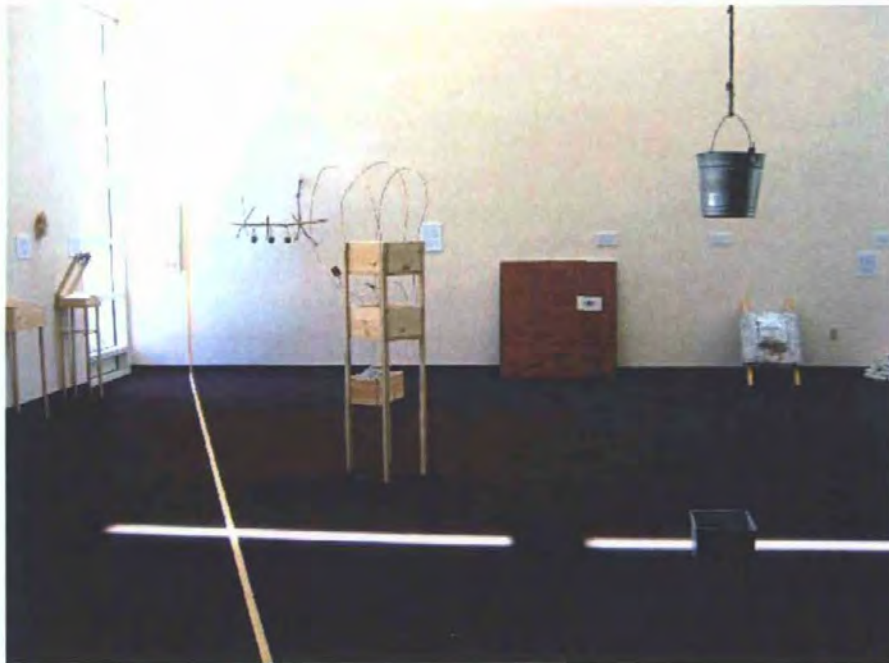
The intersection between academic methodology and creative response has influenced both the process of writing the dissertation and the process of creating the art that has attended it. I have found myself deeply concerned with questions of authenticity of objects that I make in my practice as an artist: asking myself if these things are supported by archaeological research? To some extent the objects I have made are what they are: it is not necessary for them to be reconstructions of the artefacts of the past in order for them to be valid responses to it, but “authenticity” in the context of my work relates to how effectively the work reflects my understanding of the Neolithic period.

Archaeological artefacts are the remnants of material culture, not necessarily the product of a deliberately creative process that results in decorative or skilfully made objects that are appreciated for their artful manufacture. I want my work to be inspired by the art of the British Neolithic period, to feel as if could have come from that period, but not to simply copy extant artefacts. I have not attempted to remake Neolithic Britain, but to gesture toward it while making artworks that are made with a “contemporary Neolithic” mindset. By this I mean that I have created work that is inspired by Neolithic

spaces and ideas, finding ideas for works by immersing myself as fully as possible in what is known of the art and architecture of Neolithic Britons' culture. I want to become a Neolithic artist in the contemporary age.

The tension between my work in the context of post-modern contemporary art and my emulation of ancient practices has informed this creative journey of discovery, as I have created work that dwells in the modern world while simultaneously pursuing understanding of a distant past in order to fill my need for meaningful cultural identity. Following the tradition of contemporary artists who are intrigued by self-examination, in the process of exploring the Neolithic I have endeavoured to understand and satisfy both my lifelong fascination with megaliths and my difficulty accepting the contemporary art world, which I describe later. In this context my work may appear to be reactionary, attempting to reach far back into the past to a period in which post-modernism and all the theory that has led up to contemporary art become irrelevant, while there is also a theme of romantic idealism in the work.

I decided early in my research that I would need to present the work I made in connection to the research and I have described my exploration of display contexts later in the thesis. I accumulated works that I created in response to my exploration of the Neolithic period, ultimately opening an exhibit titled "*Mr. Pearce's Cabinet of New Neolithic Wonders*". References to "the show", "the opening reception", "the *Cabinet*" found in the thesis refer to this presentation of my work. The photographs printed here show two views of the exhibit as it appeared in 2006.



Two views of "*Mr. Pearce's Cabinet of Contemporary Neolithic Wonders*" as installed at the Kwan Fong Gallery of Art and Culture, California Lutheran University, CA in Summer of 2006.

## Literature – Two Important Texts

Although there have been many efforts to describe, collect together, and explain work that appears to correspond to the concerns of ancient peoples, particularly studies of United States “earth artists”, few have been concerned with the relationship between the British Neolithic and contemporary art. Two writers are particularly important in this ongoing literary exploration: the critic Lucy Lippard, and the archaeologist Colin Renfrew.<sup>2</sup> In 1983, Lippard’s book *Overlay*<sup>3</sup> was the first by a major critic to examine art that was rooted in prehistoric art and architecture. Colin Renfrew is particularly noted here for his study of the similarity of the practices of modern archaeology to those of contemporary art in his book *Figuring it Out*.<sup>4</sup> Neither author restricts their work to British prehistory, taking a more general view of world archaeology, although both make some effort to note the relationship between British land artists and their environment. There are major differences in the two works: Lippard’s survey comes from the perspective of an art critic observing a trend in mid Twentieth Century art practice; she states that her book is an effort to rethink her approach to contemporary arts: “My subject is not prehistoric images in contemporary art, but prehistoric images and contemporary art”<sup>5</sup>. Meanwhile, Renfrew has done much to draw attention to contemporary art in academic archaeological discourse<sup>6</sup>, pointing to the similarities between excavation and the work of many contemporary artists. He notes that

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<sup>2</sup> Other texts include Maureen Korp’s 2002 *Sacred Art of the Earth*, Suzaan Boettger’s 2002 *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* and John Beardsley’s 1984 *Earthworks and Beyond*. Neither is particularly focused upon the relationship between the art and architecture of the Neolithic and the Modern period, but merely refer to the Neolithic as one of many ancient sources of inspiration for modern artists. Lippard and Renfrew are distinguished by their attention to Megalithic culture.

<sup>3</sup> Lippard, 1995

<sup>4</sup> Renfrew, 2003

<sup>5</sup> Lippard 1983, 3

<sup>6</sup> Renfrew, Gosden and DeMarrais 2004, Renfrew 1990, 2002, 2003, 2004

archaeologists dig, discover objects and buildings then interpret them and offer their work to the public as a method of understanding where we have come from and what we are, while for a hundred years contemporary artists have been engaged in much the same project, to explore materials and express their understanding of what makes human culture. Renfrew states that the central thesis of his book is that:

*“there is an apparent analogy between the position of the observer, the gallery-goer who sees such works for the first time, and the archaeologist, who has excavated assemblages of artefacts from the past and has to make some kind of sense out of them.”*<sup>7</sup>

He makes comparisons between the approaches of artists to their work with that of archaeologists, and the results of artists’ work to the cultural artefacts uncovered and displayed by excavation. Elsewhere Renfrew has noted a “fine art” approach to Neolithic architecture developing among the post and inter-war sculptors Hepworth, Moore, and the painter Paul Nash, who found British stone circles and megaliths fascinating and used them as research for their own works<sup>8</sup>. In *Figuring It Out* he extends this assessment to other artists’ work, in particular Andy Goldsworthy, David Mach and Richard Long.

Renfrew makes a good effort to make contemporary art accessible to archaeologists, perhaps seeing the need for archaeologists to be reminded of the origins of their field, particularly noting the origins of both contemporary museums and the discipline of archaeology in renaissance cabinets of curiosity.<sup>9</sup> Since the heady days of the early renaissance the archaeological academy has consistently attempted to introduce scientific rigor into its methods, but here, revolting against determinism,

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<sup>7</sup> Renfrew 2003, 20

<sup>8</sup> Renfrew 2004, 18

<sup>9</sup> Renfrew 2003, 83

Renfrew suggests that a more introspective concept of presentation is equally valid. This is certainly the case for artists, who must respond subjectively to their various stimuli, but are not held accountable to the same criteria as an archaeologist, instead being encouraged to make irrational leaps of faith into their individual explorations of the creative universe.

Neither Lippard nor Renfrew provide an analysis of methodologies that are used by artists who respond to archaeology: Lippard offers a critical review, while Renfrew describes inter-disciplinary similarities of approach to the exploration of culture by artists and archaeologists, making somewhat superficial comparisons between the outcomes of the work of some contemporary artists with archaeological excavation procedures and the display of artefacts. Renfrew dwells on this comparison, using among other examples the seeming resemblance of Richard Long's *Chalk Line* to an archaeological section, and the work of artist Mark Dion, who imitates deliberately archaeological practice during the creation of his old-fashioned display cases filled with modern trash. Renfrew's view of contemporary land art is coloured both by his patronage of the artists he discusses<sup>10</sup> and the occasional naiveté of his approach, that is at its worst paternally conservative; *Figuring It Out* most resembles a guidebook intended to introduce contemporary art to archaeologists specifically and inviting them to find insight into their practice from it.

Art critic Lucy Lippard is more interested in the unknown elements of prehistory than Renfrew, the "Speculative History" embracing non-academic interpretations and archaeologists whose work is generally thought to be on the fringe of respectable

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<sup>10</sup> From 1986 – 1996 Lord Renfrew was the Master of Jesus College, Cambridge, where many of the artists in his book were granted shows of their work during his tenure, including Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy, Eduardo Paolozzi, Antony Gormley, Mark Dion, and William Turnbull.

research. In keeping with her feminist approach she focuses upon Marija Gimbutas, an archaeologist who exaggerates goddess sources to illogical extremes; Alexander Marshack is cited as another influential source, his controversial lunar calendars and theories about lunar notations found in scratches on bones stretches credulity. Lippard's adherence to these sources, which are the subject if not of scorn, then of serious criticism among archaeologists, raises the question of source material in arts practice: Does it matter if crop circles are created by aliens, or by the lads down at the local pub? Regardless of their origin, crop circles are beautiful images placed in the landscape. If an artist chooses, their art can be based upon complete nonsense, but this choice doesn't prevent the work's status as art. This approach seems anti-academic, but the important thing to note is that an artist's idiosyncratic sources need not be subject to the same objective scrutiny as a study of their work may be. Chagall's dreams in paint need not be rooted in psychoanalysis in order to be effective paintings, but a study of them from a Jungian point of view certainly should be rooted in the discipline of psychology. Artists make things for a variety of reasons of equal validity: because they feel like it, or like what they make, or get paid to, but not necessarily to prove a point of view. As a case in point, this dissertation describes the academic archaeological background to and yet documents the results of a personally idiosyncratic creative practice. The practice itself is rooted in and responds to Neolithic ideas, but remains a creative practice.

Lippard focuses on the scale of the work of American artists, although she includes several Britons<sup>11</sup>. Here her book becomes less useful, as she dwells on spectacular earthworks art by Holt, Smithson, de Maria, Christo and Jean Claude *et alia*, whose

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<sup>11</sup> Including reference to Dartington's Peter Kiddle and his Public Works Company.



relationship to ancient art and architecture seems somewhat tenuous. Her book shows its age when she takes an uncritical approach to anthropological sources like Frazer's *Golden Bough* for her folkloric interpretations of sites in Britain, or the fantasies of Michael Dames, whose conclusions have been rounded upon by historian Ronald Hutton in his more recent research.

*Overlay* profoundly inspired me when I first became interested in Neolithic sites and culture; while it is still a monument in my collection of literature relating to the dissertation, I no longer subscribe to Lippard's brand of romantic idealism, preferring to create my own specifically British vision.

### **When was Britain Neolithic?**

The British Neolithic period starts around 4500 BC and moves into the Bronze Age somewhere around 2000 BC. Neolithic culture depended upon stone tools until the discovery of smelting brought the improved tools. There is no clearly defined line in time to separate the two; the practices of each period blends into the other for many centuries<sup>12</sup>. This artificial division into categorical periods of time is exemplary of the nineteenth Century approach to learning: an encyclopaedic view that separated distinct areas of human experience with little space for the areas in between. In reality the distinction between the ages is entirely indistinct, and took centuries. The cave paintings and tools of the famous caves of Lascaux and other memorable sites are 10,000 years

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<sup>12</sup> Hodder Westropp wrote what may have been the first archaeological handbook; published in 1867, the author proposed the four-part hierarchy of progress through the Ages: we owe the Mesolithic to him, while credit for the Palaeolithic and Neolithic must be given to Lubbock, whose *Prehistoric Times* had been published in 1865 offering his simpler dual division of the eras of prehistory before metals, meeting with resistance at the Anthropological Society.

older than the Neolithic period, so I have not referred to those masterpieces of Paleolithic art in this dissertation.

The British Bronze Age segues into the Iron Age in an equally blurry transition sometime around 1000 BC., and into the historic Iron Age around 500 BC., when the earliest classical literary records of Britain came into existence. Because none of the extant copies of these are original editions, instead having passed through hundreds of years of copying and re-copying with all the errors that creep into manuscripts thus passed on, their quality is extremely patchy until Julius Caesar's account of the Roman attack upon Britain under his command, and Tacitus' account of the life of *Agricola*, but thereafter is little improved until the Sixth Century Gildas wrote the first (unreliable) history of Britain.

### **Who were Neolithic Britons?**

The people of Britain were probably of indigenous stock from the Palaeolithic until the Iron Age, when the Belgic Cantii took possession of the South East of England, giving the region the name by which it is still known: Kent. Caesar describes the people of Britain in his Gallic Wars narrative:

*"The interior of Britain is inhabited by people who claim, on the strength of their own tradition, to be indigenous. The coastal areas are inhabited by invaders who crossed over from Belgium for the sake of plunder and then, when the fighting was over, settled there and began to work the land; these people have almost all kept the names of the tribes from which they originated".<sup>13</sup>*

And his statement is defended by contemporary archaeologists who note that continental European tribes; the Parisii, the Atrebates, the Catuellauni and several

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<sup>13</sup> Caesar V, 12.

others nameless groups came to Britain at varying times, but that their impact was limited to relatively small areas<sup>14</sup>. Diodorus Siculus, perhaps following Caesar, says:

*“And Britain, we are told, is inhabited by tribes which are autochthonous and preserve in their ways of living the ancient manner of life.”*<sup>15</sup>

Despite the historical record, in the popular imagination Iron Age Britons were Celts. Despite revivalist attempts to prove this over two hundred years we are not certain that there were *any* tribal Celts in Britain. This almost sacrilegious statement is grounded in solid research; *none* of the pre-invasion classical authors says that there were Celts in Britain.<sup>16</sup> The inhabitants of Iron Age Britain may be described as belonging to a loose grouping of tribes speaking related languages, now known as Celtic, but they did not use that name themselves, nor would they have understood themselves to have been part of this ethnic group<sup>17</sup>.

We may be sure that tribal Celts lived somewhere in Central and Southern France roughly up to the boundaries of the Rhine in the East, and into Spain in the West. Pytheas the Greek of Marseilles circumnavigated Britain about 300 BC, reporting that the *Prettanic* Isles were North of the lands of the Celts. Although Tacitus tells us in his *Agricola* that the people of Britain were the descendants of German, Spanish and Gaulish tribes<sup>18</sup>, he was a stranger to the Pretani, simply reporting the life of his heroic father-in-law, while Caesar and Pytheas both had first hand experience of the islands, which makes one more inclined to trust their accounts.

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<sup>14</sup> Wood, Collis, Arnold, Gibson etc.

<sup>15</sup> Diodorus Siculus, V.21.

<sup>16</sup> Emphasized by John Collins in his 2003 exploration of Celtic origins.

<sup>17</sup> Renfrew 1988, 249.

<sup>18</sup> And that's about all he tells us - reading *Agricola* makes one wish that Tacitus had treated his descriptions of the people of Britain with the same attention that he gave to the Germans in his *Germania*

The argument for Celtic invasion depends upon the appearance of Celtic objects in Britain in ritual deposits and funeral contexts, but since the 1960's archaeologists and geneticists have largely discredited descriptions of a La Tene / Hallstat Celtic invasion in favour of a concept of cultural transformation justified by dissemination of artefacts in conditions consistent with earlier patterns in burial practices<sup>19</sup>. We know seagoing trade was widespread and efficient thanks to the accounts of ancient Greek and Roman travellers like Pytheas, who hitch-hiked his way by boat from the Mediterranean to Britain, probably circumnavigating this island by way of Iceland (Thule).<sup>20</sup> A solid infrastructure of trade shipping must have existed to make this feat possible,<sup>21</sup> so dissemination of artistic styles and ideas was viable alongside the dispersal of traded wines and other goods. This means effectively that the people of Iron Age Britain are the cultural and genetic descendants of indigenous Neolithic Britons, a claim defended by contemporary MDNA research by Oppenheimer<sup>22</sup> *et alia* that shows that in spite of the incursions of invading forces in British History until 1066, an average contemporary citizen is probably 60% indigenous Briton<sup>23</sup>, ethnically most similar to the Basques in Northern Spain.

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<sup>19</sup> Collis, 2003, Oppenheimer, 2006

<sup>20</sup> Cunliffe 2001

<sup>21</sup> Cunliffe believes that Pytheas also explored inland Britain on foot and made careful measurements of his Latitude using a gnomon to calculate his distance from his homeport, creating a very accurate estimate of the length and breadth of the Island. It is pleasant to think of this Greek sailor gazing on the ancient monuments we are able to visit over two thousand years later.

<sup>22</sup> See Oppenheimer 2006, Collis 2003

<sup>23</sup> In Appendix 1. I have provided the text of an email from Bob Burns, an expert in the field of genetic research who comments there upon the breakdown of genetic material in contemporary population. I am grateful to him for making clear some of the complexities of DNA research



Copyright National Museum of Ireland

Figure 1. The famous Knowth mace head. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland

If Oppenheimer is correct, this re-evaluation of the origins of the British people will have an immense impact on research into artefacts like the beautiful mace head carved with a spiral pattern found in the immense Irish chambered cairn at Knowth (Fig. 1) that may have been an early manifestation of later Celtic knot work, discovered in the East passage and estimated to date from 3125 BC.<sup>24</sup> The plethora of carvings at the Boyne Valley passage tombs incorporating spirals, lozenges and circles may represent a style that later developed into the later intricate carvings upon Irish crosses. I look forward to the results of future research in this period of art history, which continues to be largely neglected.

I am particularly interested in the transitional culture of the Bronze Age where it blends into the Neolithic, because the introduction of metal alters the relationship man had with natural materials. The linear division of prehistory is not a particularly helpful

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<sup>24</sup> Pitts 331

segregation of the various periods, as change sometimes took many centuries to take root. This situation exposes the unsatisfactory nature of the Cartesian approach to prehistory: encyclopaedic techniques do not offer a successful method for understanding when applied to a culture that had no respect for classification.

One tangible effect that this uncertain transition has had upon my creative practice has been to stimulate me to introduce work that provides commentary upon the end of the period before man's use of the earth turned toward metal production in the third millennium BC.<sup>25</sup>

*The End of the Beginning I* (Fig. 130, 131) is one of two works introducing copper as a contrasting element, here as a mixed media panel and in *Ash Pile* (Fig. 120), as a sculpture that offers the pre-metal period as an idealized period, after which man loses his innocence. These pieces particularly romanticise the transition from the Stone Age into the age of metal. Copper was the first metal to be used in trade, and appears to have been crafted into ceremonial axe heads, supplanting the flints that had previously been dominant.

Continuing the theme of transition, *Ash Pile* emphasises the end of the Stone Age as man's intimate relationship to the natural world changes from co-existence to industrial exploitation. Farming may be seen as exploitation of the land, and when it is practiced with modern techniques I would concur, but the scale of Neolithic farming is minor and land use appears to have been cyclical and husbanded. It may be argued that flint mining is industrial exploitation, but the flints are used in their natural form, and remain in their natural form until knapped into tools and weapons, whereas smelting requires

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<sup>25</sup> Russel, 2000, 148. Russel reports here on the last flint miner in Britain: "Arthur 'Pony' Ashley ceased work in April 1934 aged 71. After six thousand years, the history of flint mining in Britain had come to an end".

total destruction of the stone in order to render metal. I see this transition from stone to bronze symbolic of the loss of innocence of mankind, as he begins to regard the earth as a resource instead of a part of his cosmogony.

### **Why Neolithic British Art and Architecture?**

The most superficial reason for my interest in the British Neolithic period in particular was a youthful affinity to the romantic idea that life was better before “civilisation” came to the primitive world. In the course of life I have been disabused of my idealistic notions of this largely invented past, but my interest in the period has grown stronger than ever because the Neolithic is so much more mysterious and complex than I had known.

My involvement with Neolithic Britain dates back to my childhood adventures with my father as we explored the pleasures of megalithic Wiltshire having moved there in the nineteen-seventies. Later, as my college experience began at Swindon College of Art I became disillusioned and disappointed in what I then saw as a pretentious and exclusive art establishment, and drawn to the anti-establishment subcultures that fermented in the early 1980's. I became increasingly interested in megaliths as places of particular focus in the landscape because they appeared to have nothing to do with the class system and capitalist hierarchies that appeared to dominate British culture in those days. Megaliths and Earthworks offered an alternative to high art, which Lippard saw in 1983 (I was eighteen and a newly enrolled Foundation student at Swindon Art School) as the territory of the upper class, and made possible a rebellion against the dominant culture. Lippard might have been describing me in this passage:

“Many young people, discovering art's separation from ordinary people and life have turned to nature itself as a substitute. Ancient art, wiped

clean of its class and religious content by the ages seems almost natural in its distance – a distance that allows it to become, paradoxically more intimate than the art of our own times.”<sup>26</sup>

In addition to identifying accurately the roots of my shared experience of Neolithic Britain, Lippard also noted that ancient spaces are romanticized because they exist in nature, and are dominated by it, while also subtly altering the landscapes within which they are placed<sup>27</sup>. Further:

“Our lack of shared beliefs and values contributes to our fascination with ancient images and monuments. They are often attractive precisely because their meaning cannot be interpreted.”<sup>28</sup>

Archaeological artefacts and sites inspire doubt and uncertainty: the practice of archaeology is an attempt to understand where we have come from and to describe the past as if it were another country. Excavations become more interesting precisely because the uncovered material remains have an unknown history; artefacts that have been recovered in archaeological digs are more interesting because they require questions and an exploration of doubt. The unknown offers mystery and makes interesting what once was commonplace.

Doubt is not necessarily a negative quality in art, for as much as elements of uncertainty and unease are necessary for transformation in ritual, they operate in creative art, where elements of ritual are perhaps more apparent than in other forms of art. In fact, obscurity and query *should* be present in our work, not for the sake of it, but in the same way that the obscurity of a secret society allows the initiated to participate, showing their secrets in plain view, only offering secret knowledge to those who

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<sup>26</sup> Lippard 1983 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 11.



penetrate into the group. The work thus becomes mysterious and alluring, drawing people into an enquiring relationship with it.

While I have found that my deepest satisfaction as an artist comes when people are engaged in the narrative offered by the work, the imperfectly understood and ultimately incomprehensible “meaning” there are problems with the communication of ideas. I make a work, the viewer may think they understand what it is “saying”, but in reality their experience is framed by their own experience of life, not mine, and they can never know what the piece is meant to do from my point of view. How can they? I am frequently uncertain of the absolute meaning of the work myself. I know where the ideas that surround the process of making come from, perhaps, but seldom understand the needs of my own process of making. An additional problem is that a viewer’s experience of my work has little to do with my experience of making it, as their experience of it is mediated by their own set of values. Using the Neolithic culture as we know it may offer a framework or a shared “language” that gives observers an opportunity to hang their own narrative; in other words, the narrative the viewer creates can only be personal, but may be guided.

There are several areas in Neolithic art and architecture that may be used as strategic choices for making contemporary artwork. Alignment on solar and lunar events was a pre-occupation of the builders of all types of monument. Symbolic languages that express Neolithic Geometry may be created as art in their own right, and I have used them to create contemporary artworks like my *Geomantic Neolithic Man* (Fig 22.), which uses symbols based on Neolithic geomancy and rock art. Decorative rock art appears in association with many of the monuments, except where the rock has

been too soft to withstand centuries of erosion, including labyrinths and more simple designs, all of which are good material for new work. Predominately though, what has influenced my work has been an awareness of the act of making: the creative choices of Neolithic Britons do not appear to originate arbitrarily. Material choices included wood, stone, wax, fur, hair, and other natural materials that were available, their uses intimately known.

To limit the contemporary artist to such a palette may appear confining, but when work develops from limited choices it takes on a characteristic feeling of *necessity*. Additionally, I have rejected absolutely rigid adherence in favour of a thematic approach: in keeping with the practices of Neolithic people, the scale of the projects may be expanded to include communities, and the act of making the work can be viewed as the “art” of it.

In the same way that archaeologists experience the joy of finding a cache of objects concealed in the Stone Age, work may be made with secrets concealed within, known only by the makers of the piece, because the work is not made for an audience greater than the group that creates it. Secrets and shared experiences encourage groups to remain groups.

To some extent my work is a rejection of the treatment of nature by contemporary artists. In this irrational period of post-history, the new age of reconstruction and revision, we look for art that reflects our time and celebrate pickled animal corpses in vitrines, tents and soiled underwear, moulded plastic boxes. Works by many contemporary artists reflect a profound cultural discomfort with the natural world, demonstrating a desire to observe death in vitrine, and an exclusion of nature. Although

dramatic, Hirst's dissected animal corpses in formaldehyde represent nature ravished, not a mother honoured.<sup>29</sup> Emin's tent has nothing to do with camping within a bucolic landscape, everything to do with an interior, flimsily protecting her from the dangers of the world. Despite its title, that at first reading seems to reach towards the earthworks of ancient Britain, or at least toward a riverside or ditch, Rachel Whiteread's *Embankment 2005* (Fig. 2) at the Tate Modern, made from gigantic piles of white plastic moulds of the insides of cardboard boxes provides a commentary upon the spaces within industrialized urban life, within which no nature exists. It is a layering of the contained space, a moulded absence, reproduced excessively and emotionlessly.



Figure 2. Rachel Whiteread's *Embankment 2005* Photo by the Author

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<sup>29</sup> Korp 2002, 67 includes commentary upon the lack of writing by European explorers about the New World in terms of Mother Earth, instead, the prevailing attitude of the colonists was to view the land as a virgin waiting to be ravished

Insofar as this dissertation may be seen as a manifesto supporting archaic creative practices, it is simultaneously an acceptance and a rejection of the contemporary art world. I do not reject contemporary tools and ideas, but look for the ancient ideas that can bring fresh life into my contemporary art practice. Conditioned by the present age, I look to pre-history for the background resources to invigorate my work and to bring my art to a fundamental level.

The practice of archaeology is predominately concerned with understanding the past; seeking answers to Gauguin's existential "Where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?"<sup>30</sup> But in the effort to do so, practitioners must look at partial remains of materials that were once used. The picture is never complete; even in places like Pompeii and Herculaneum, where we peer at the past through a glass less obscure than that which we focus upon prehistory, we find more unanswered questions than explanation. Archaeologists interpret the absences of things, the spaces in between, traces of bodies that sometimes remain in the earth merely as stains. Excavation can be about deciphering fine differences of moist soil, discovering where a post-hole once had been by detecting faint shadows in the soil at Holy Wood, or revealing an ancient road by noting the compression of soil from the weight of ancient footsteps at Durrington Walls. Many of the works in the *Cabinet* exhibit documented in this thesis are efforts to express this pre-occupation with absence.

Because I work with liminal materials and I am concerned with death, I find myself viewed with either suspicion or a sort of reverence by people who visit my workspace. Some visitors to the outdoor workshop where I made the *Snake Box* pieces were somewhat disgusted with the use of a carcass to make the work. On self-reflection I

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<sup>30</sup> Noted in Renfrew 2003, 11

found that my reaction normally would have been the same, but because I am using the animals to make art my experience of the dead animal has been altered. The carcasses became part of the art-making process, and lost much of their pre-conditioned status as taboo objects. I think this shift is intimately connected to the state of shamanism, where the shaman mediates between the conventional world and the world of the dead. I am working with the language of imagery based on the absence of the dead from the living world. The form of the carcass creates a record of absence and hints at communication with the world apart.

I live beside the National Forest, a liminal place, between suburban Los Angeles and the desert wilderness. Each morning I cross from the housing tracts into the liminal space of the partially tended parkland and on into the untouched wild. I have learned to respect the park workers, who have a relationship with this space far more intimate than my own, as they deal with the strange problems of interactions between wild animals and suburban visitors. Mountain lions are the largest predators, occasionally killing unwary cyclists when their food supplies are short. Coyotes will kill cats and small dogs, although their reputation is much more fearsome than their reality. They tend to keep away from people, scavenging their trash at night. I have seen solo scouts outside my home in the middle of the night, extraordinarily confident in their possession of the dark streets. The park workers find snakes are a problem for park visitors, who seem to think that wildlife should be kept beyond the boundaries of the park and prevented from intruding. I asked them to save the snakes they kill for the *Snake box* pieces, partly because I like the liminal origins of the animals. They represent a sacrificial absence –

the animals are killed and made absent from the park because they intruded too closely into the land man has occupied.

I have spent a great deal of time exploring liminal spaces in the ancient British landscape in the process of attempting to understand and as a creative mediator between the architects and sculptors of these wonderful places. As I have learned more and experienced the spaces with increasing intimacy I have found that my relationship to other people visiting the spaces has changed. People use the spaces in different ways: to a neo-pagan group West Kennett Long Barrow is a sacred place for celebrations and focused chanting; to an archaeologist it's a particularly interesting burial mound excavated and restored in the early twentieth Century; to my parents' old Wiltshire countryman neighbour Peter Patterson the barrow is something "them old ones made". They are multi-layered spaces that express as many ideas as there are people to visit them. My experience of them has been to attempt to see them as by my ancestors who made them. The process of learning has shaped the practice of making as I have attempted to embody their ideas.

### **Neolithic Architecture**

There are many thousands of Neolithic monuments in Britain in a bewildering diversity of arrangement and scale. While it is absurd to categorize them too closely, in part because the people of the five millennia before Christ appear to have delighted in rejecting conformity, some generalizations may be made to help understand the buildings, beginning with a division between artificial cave structures and open-air enclosures. In this thesis the word "tomb" is not used as a descriptive term for

chambered cairns because of evidence that the interpretation of chambered cairns simply as sepulchres maintained for the deposit of the remains of the dead is profoundly inaccurate, neglecting other uses of these curious buildings. Different types of structure have had different affects on my work.

### **Artificial caves.**

**Passage Mounds** – Found throughout coastal Europe, these are circular or oval mounds with a chamber accessed through a passage.



Figure 3. Newgrange, Ireland. 2004 Photo: Dickson.

The greatest examples of these are found in the Boyne Valley, Ireland. Newgrange (*Fig. 3*) is the finest of three vast mounds of stones, covered with turf and faced with a drum-shaped wall of white quartz. These first began to appear about 3500 BC. Note that Newgrange, having been heavily and inappropriately “restored” is not typical of its type, which in the British countryside more often look like this picture (*Fig. 4*) of Maes Howe, in Orkney.





Figure 4. Maes Howe. Photo by the author

I am interested in particular in the shape of these structures, because in their original form they appear to be intended as spheres, representing a Neolithic view of the cosmos. The half sphere we see upon the surface perhaps expresses the visible half of an ideal sphere, the other half of which is in the earth. The passage enters the centre chamber of this spherical structure, which represents the Neolithic universe. Stone circles and earthen round enclosures appear to correspond to this cosmogony, and we see the imagery of the penetrated circle and the circle with central marking endlessly repeated in the art of the period, ground as half spherical cup marks in rock. In my work, spheres and circles may be seen to represent the universe; the penetrated circle or sphere represents mankind's efforts to understand being within the cosmos. I became so familiar with the circle symbol manifesting in Neolithic spaces and decorative works that I used it repeatedly in the *Cabinet*.

**Stalled cairns** – A variety of passage mound found in Orkney and Scotland. They have long chambers that are divided by vertical slabs to create sections in the passageway.

The largest of these is found on Rousay Island, Orkney, where a huge modern barn covers and preserves the de-turfed stones of Midhowe (*Fig. 5*).



Figure 5. Midhowe. Photo by the Author

When I visited this odd combination of modern and ancient buildings I was puzzled and intrigued by the contrasts of the space. I realized that the metal building had been designed to protect the ancient stonework from the elements so that scholars may continue to visit the unusual dry stone walling that must surely be the most ancient in Britain.<sup>31</sup> However, because the humidity within the building is excessive, there are serious problems with mould growing on the stones, leading to fracturing. It is ironic that

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<sup>31</sup> Local landowner William Grant excavated the site and covered it with the barn in 1933.

a building that has survived for four and a half thousand years can suffer from our efforts of protection.

Midhowe's stalled cairns became a major influence in the creation of pieces like my *Orcadian Dead* series (Fig. 96, 97, 98). The relationship between the ancient building and the modern barn acts as a metaphor for the relationship between contemporary art and ancient art, with the chambered cairn contained within, protected by and simultaneously concealed by and prevented from being made available for experience within its ancient landscape.

**Horned Cairns** – A Scottish variety of Passage Mound, with curved revetted courtyards on either end of an elongated mound that may have been used for ceremonial events including fire and feasts. Camster is a well-restored example of this style. The famous Tomb of Eagles at Isbister is probably another example of a Horned Cairn. During a trip to Orkney in 2005 I visited Isbister and was allowed to hold the skull of one of the men whose bones had been placed within the cairn thousands of years ago. This was one of my most intimate experiences of the Orcadian dead, capped perhaps by holding a bead that had been broken in two while the cairn was being built. The two halves were reunited when Isbister was excavated, providing a window into an event that must have irritated one of the people who helped construct the building thousands of years ago.

Horned cairns emphasize the element of performance and the role of the cairns as places of doing, where events happened, rather than as cold architectural backdrops or territorial markers as proposed by Renfrew and others<sup>32</sup>, whose statistical analysis of the placement of cairns within tribal areas seems consistent. However, this view of the

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<sup>32</sup> Renfrew, 1973b, Hedges, 1984

monuments leaves them on the fringes of tribal activities, not at the heart of the culture. As Julian Thomas<sup>33</sup> and Colin Richards<sup>34</sup> have emphasized in their work, the Early Neolithic is particularly a time in which the making of things (stone circles, artificial caves, earth work enclosures, carved objects, axe heads etcetera) is the dominant activity around ritual practice. This aspect of the Neolithic has profoundly impacted on my practice, as I see the making and doing of work as the most important parts of the process of creative outlay.



Figure 6. Camster Long. Photo credit unknown

**Chambered Long Barrows** – Found in the Western side of Britain, with fine examples in Wessex, these are long mounds with stone chambers built into them dating from about 3500 BC. The huge extent of West Kennett Long barrow with an early twentieth century restoration of its chambers offers a fine specimen. The entrance to the chambers is at the East end of the long mound (*Fig.7*).

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas, 2004

<sup>34</sup> Richards, 2004



Figure 7. West Kennett Long Barrow. Photo by the Author

The “useful” part of this type of barrow is now small, being a series of stone chambers at the entrance end. The rest of the mound may once have been a timber built chambered passage used as a mortuary structure that eventually rotted and collapsed, leaving the long earthen mounds. The work is beyond what is necessary, made as a gesture of deliberate excess. I sense an element of penance in the deliberately grand scale of these earthworks, a need to pay respect to the ancestral heritage of the tribe. By going to additional lengths to fulfil my creative obligations I align my work with this kind of practice. When making objects it is worth making the extra effort to do the difficult thing rather than taking the easy way out; why make rope from nettles when the hardware store sells perfectly good (and better quality) industrially made hemp rope? It is in the practice of making that I am able to offer my respect to the natural world and honour the dead of Neolithic Britain.

**Court Cairns** – These are long mounds with a forecourt at the wide end from which a passage leads into a stone chamber.



Figure 8. Glenmalin Court Cairn. Photographer Unknown

Uniquely Irish, these should not be confused with Scottish and Northern English horned cairns, which appear to have been a later development of passage mounds. Most court cairns contained the burnt remains of one individual, but Ronald Hutton observes:

*"To call such monuments "tombs" at all is stretching the meaning of the word, the shrine component being all-inclusive."<sup>35</sup>*

The shrine element of all chambered mounds is vitally important to my practice. When I put together the *Cabinet* show, I was very aware of an almost religious veneration in my work, which is certainly an attempt to find a truthful means of self-expression that comes from nature and is close to the earth. The gallery becomes my personal shrine to our relationship to the past. By making things with my own hands and

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<sup>35</sup> Hutton 1991, 29

avoiding industrial materials as much as possible I am aided by nature and am one step away from natural materials. By recycling materials that are close to nature but have been damaged or altered (telephone poles, for example) I can make creative and healing work.

**Portal Dolmens** – Found in Britain, France and the North and SE of Ireland, these are stone chambers often arranged with a taller stone at one end so that the capstone tilts. Some examples had mounds covering the stone structures, while the megaliths of others stood exposed to the air, sometimes simply with a ramp of earth to allow the placement of the capstone. Trethevy Quoit is a splendid portal dolmen standing near the Hurlers stone circle in Cornwall.



Figure 9. Trethevy Quoit. Photo by the Author

Balance seems to have been important to megalithic builders. Even now we can find huge boulders in the landscape that were balanced thousands of years ago. These rocking stones are easily destroyed by mindless vandalism, so there aren't many left. Dolmens are more durable, appearing to have been at least partially covered with an earth mound, leaving an open entrance. Dolmen capstones are extraordinary feats of megalithic engineering, perilously perched upon vertical boulders.

**Box Dolmens** – These are neither true artificial caves, in that they may not be entered, nor are they enclosures, so they are included here because they have more in common with the artificial cave type. They are a very early type of megalithic construction found in Britain, consisting of a small stone box in a round mound, unlike the other types of artificial cave in that they were typically used only once. Box Dolmens should not be confused with much later Iron Age cyst burials. They may represent an early representation of the microcosmic sphere noted elsewhere in the text. I used the box shape in several pieces that contain memorial-like ashes and art that has been concealed from view.

**Earthen Long Barrows** – Found in the Eastern side of Britain. Many began as timber mortuary houses that were sometimes burnt before the remains were covered with a long mound of earth, broader at one end. (*Fig.10*) As the centuries moved by, the construction of these earthy piles changed from coverings for burials to long mounds with almost token placements of cattle bones, perhaps intended as ritual statements.





Figure 10. Beckhampton Long Barrow. Photo by Tim Clark

Hutton suggests that there are three possible explanations for this change: first the more egalitarian structure of the Early Neolithic was replaced by a rise in elitism as sedentary agrarian culture replaced the hunter-gatherer model of the late Mesolithic; second, the authority of the ancestors was supplanted by the power of individuals; and finally the function of the barrows was perceived to have changed, needing less focus on human remains, meaning the construction of the monument was enough in itself.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hutton 1991, 68.

## Open Air Enclosures



Figure 11. Milfield North Reconstructed Timber Circle. Photo by Andy Burnham

**Timber Circles and Lines** - Circles of wooden stakes, remaining as postholes. These are the most ephemeral of Neolithic structures, leaving almost no physical remains to study, but if endurance through time is a measure of the success of these installations, then along with stone circles these are the most profoundly successful of ancient sacred spaces, having been constructed from 3000 BC to 1000 BC in England, Scotland and Wales, and on up to the time of Christ in Ireland.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Gibson 2000, 9.



Figure 12. Holme-next-the-Sea timber circle, or “Seahenge”. Photo by Andy Burnham

The well known timber circle known as “Seahenge” (*Fig. 12*), is an especially well preserved example dated to 2050 BC, saved from destruction in 1998 by archaeologist Mark Brenand at Holme-next-the-Sea, in Norfolk. The walls of the circle were made by splitting young trees and building a palisade of the stakes with the flat surfaces facing inward. An unusual doorway had been created through the walls by using a forked branch that allowed access to the enclosed area containing an upside-down tree.<sup>38</sup> Other timber circles have posts that are spread further apart, making a less solid structure. Current archaeological thinking about Stonehenge is that this most unusual of monuments is in fact the apogee of wood circle building, although built from stone.<sup>39</sup>

In the *Cabinet* show I created an aligned cross outside the gallery using ideas inspired by Neolithic timber circles and lines. The amount of work involved in making a timber circle or alignment should not be underestimated; even using a chainsaw Mark and I laboured for a full and ache-inducing day cutting posts for the *Summer Cross*. In the Stone Age the builders laboured with flint axes. Feminist Lippard notes that crosses

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<sup>38</sup> Pryor 2002, 265.

<sup>39</sup> Eg: Gibson 1998, Burl 2000

on the landscape are a common motif among male land artists, inferring that the cross on the land is an act of dominance performed by the male artist over the recumbent female Earth Mother.<sup>40</sup> At the very least this relationship between the solar cross and men may reveal a male affinity for the sun.

**Causewayed Enclosures** – These puzzling earthworks dating from about 3800 BC appear all over North-Western Europe, but not in Ireland, or the North of the British Isles. A typical example includes a circular ditch interrupted by several causeways allowing access to the central enclosure. (*Fig. 13*) Normally there are at least two rings, sometimes more, but the outer ditches were commonly left as incomplete semi-circles. Typically, human bones are found in the ditches, and archaeologists have uncovered pits dug within the compounds of several sites. There is very little evidence that these were permanent settlements, which would leave traces of houses and food preparation. Feasting and celebration are brought symbolically into the Cabinet in the form of the Neolithic bread<sup>41</sup> and mead I served at the opening reception.

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<sup>40</sup> Lippard, 52

<sup>41</sup> Ingredients: Oatmeal, oat flour, brewers yeast, butter, milk, salt, honey.



Figure 13. Windmill Hill Causewayed Enclosure. Photo by the Author

In Wessex causewayed enclosures are distinguished for being larger than elsewhere in Britain, and for concealing much larger quantities of human bone in the ditches, while those in other regions have only occasional deposits appearing alongside other artefacts. There may have been a profound association between Windmill Hill and West Kennett Long Barrow if as Burl suggests, bodies were excarnated at Windmill Hill before being deposited in the Barrow.<sup>42</sup> Windmill Hill became particularly important to me during a series of walks approaching Avebury from the Cardinal directions to physically experience the landscape. (Approaching these monuments on foot is a very different experience than that of arriving in a car) The enclosure *feels* circular, within the circle of the landscape. The concentric circle became a motif for my show, in a doorway opening and a circular piece made of gravel and suspended plumb line.

**Henges** - first appear around 3250 BC as roughly circular ditches with earth piled up outside them. Early henges had stone circles built inside the ditch enclosure, which

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<sup>42</sup> Burl 1979, 108-109.

commonly had two causeway entrances (*Fig. 14*). Henges appear to mark a fundamental change in the sacred lives of Neolithic people, as they stopped using the ancient earthen barrows and cairns and began to focus on freestanding stones instead. Typically archaeologists find “ritual rubbish” in the ditches, including the bones of children and adults, animal bones, flints, and previously broken pottery. Pits were dug, but often left open and when excavated are often found empty of artefacts. Some henges had one or more rings of timber inside the enclosure. The name is appallingly badly chosen, derived from Stonehenge, where “henge” appears to be a Saxon word referring to the unique “hanging” stones of that monument. The ditch enclosure at Stonehenge is built the opposite way around to most henges, which have a ditch on the inside, while the embankment is on the outside. In short, the name comes from a source that is inappropriate and has features that are wholly uncharacteristic of the genre.



Figure 14. Avebury Henge in 2002 Photo by the Author

The contents of the ritual pits are particularly interesting to me as sources of art.

Deposits found in them include chalk balls, phalli, and both animal and human skeletal remains.

**Stone Circles** – famously appear all over Britain ranging from very tiny examples made from a few erected stones to huge accomplishments like the unique Avebury.



Figure 15. Avebury Stone Circle and Henge. Photo by the Author

Neolithic people started building Stone Circles about 5250 years ago initially building a circular earthen henge structure surrounding an inner ring of monoliths (*Fig. 15*), but by 2500 BC the stone circles were being built without moving any earth at all, except for the digging of socket holes. By about 1000 BC the circles were abandoned, but used for occasional burials even as late as Roman times. Hutton notes that stone structures

are more durable through centuries of entropy than are structures of wood or earth, so they have gained an exaggerated importance in the archaeological record.<sup>43</sup> Stone alignments to solar solstice events are found at some stone circles, an expression of the Neolithic Cosmogony that I found useful when making ritual preparation for the Cabinet's opening event.

**Stone Rows** – found in single, double or triple rows (although of course there are multiple rows in the famous Carnac alignments). At Avebury the remaining sinuous double row makes an avenue of alternating diamond and vertical stones. The great antiquarian Stukeley thought that the two avenues were a gigantic plan of a snake penetrating the egg of the circle. Snake shapes and spirals show up in Neolithic rock art and inspired me to include them in my work.

**Cursuses** – had a brief period of fashion between 3400 BC and 3000BC. They are elongated rectangular shaped earthworks created by laborious digging of ditches with antler picks, then the mounding of the spoil of the ditches into earthen embankments. They are the precursors of the henges, and we know absolutely nothing about why they were built or how they were used. They vary in size from being small enclosures to examples in Wessex that cover several miles, and are frequently found overlooking rivers, but as usual with Neolithic sacred space, this is a rule that is not cut and dried and there are many examples of cursuses that do not fit the template. They appear to link monuments across the landscape, so may have served as ceremonial pathways.

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<sup>43</sup> Hutton 1991, 71.



Modern observers of prehistoric sites may imagine Neolithic landscapes in which all the surviving structures were in use at the same time, a broad grouping in time that allows us to picture the people who built stone circles content to use long barrows or other monuments in the same ceremonies. The great megalithic complex at Avebury, in Wiltshire is an example of a prehistoric landscape that demonstrates broad diversity. Although West Kennett Long Barrow is only a short walk away from the stone circle in its spatial arrangement, the great barrow actually began its use centuries before the great stones now within the village of Avebury were erected. Comparative C-14 dates offer perspective on the immense span of time covered here and help to gain a sense of cultural development.<sup>44</sup> West Kennett, which is the earliest of British long barrows, dates from about 3500 BC<sup>45</sup>, nearly a thousand years before the building of rudimentary Egyptian pyramids in about 2575 BC. The barrow had been used for a millennium before it was filled with earth and the entrance blocked by gigantic stones about 2250 BC,<sup>46</sup> only three and a half centuries after the embankments at nearby Avebury had been dug around 2600 BC.<sup>47</sup> According to collected C14 dates stone circles appear to have been in use as late as the Roman invasion around the time of Christ, at the end of their use perceived as good sites for “Celtic” cist burials in round mounds.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> C-14 Data from Burl, Pitts, Davidson and Henshall, may be found in the chart in the appendices.

<sup>45</sup> Pitts 2000, 337. West Kennett Long Barrow, C-14 of skeletal remains.

<sup>46</sup> Burl 1979 ,166.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> See Appendix 2. A table of C-14 dates.

## **Finding Patterns in Neolithic Architecture for Use in Creating Contemporary Art: Using Neolithic Geomancy**

Sacred Geometry has been used to create sacred spaces for thousands of years. Evidence for the practice, known as *geomancy*, (literally the art of placing or arranging auspiciously buildings or other sites) can be found in every culture in every period of history. Sophisticated geomancy can be found in the stone circles and other ancient structures dating back to the Neolithic, although the materials available to the people who built them were most prosaic, including rock, clay, chalk and other naturally occurring materials, until the introduction of smelting at some point in the first millennium BC.

Geomancy is the practice of finding harmonious relationships between structures and the landscape within which they are placed. The best known such system is the Chinese *Feng Shui*, but there are similar systems all over the world. In Britain there is a plenitude of archaeological evidence of geomantic practice extending into the earliest days of Mesolithic construction, probably predating the building of domestic dwellings. These structures include lines of enormous posts that were placed into holes in the ground. Julian Thomas notes that these were often burned and replaced repeatedly, in a cycle of destruction and recreation that microcosmically replicates the patterns of the cosmos. I found the Geomancy of these kinds of Neolithic practice inspirational and slowly created a “language” of materials, shapes and symbols for use in my own work. I don’t expect these interpretations to hold their ground as legitimate interpretations of Neolithic practices in the archaeological community, but instead offer them as creative responses to the architecture of the period.

The methods of Neolithic Geomancy appear to include other uses of specific materials to harmonise structures, and using these materials has also informed my creative practise. Neolithic tools were made from sharpened stones (particularly flint), wood, and animal bones; clothes woven from wool coloured with a palette of natural dyes; homes were simple wooden or more rarely stone buildings, probably covered with turf roofs, and most of the landscape was covered by forest, cleared in places to allow for the modern invention of farmed crops. In the early Neolithic settlement appears to have been irregular, not permanent, and what farming there was tended to be more pastoral than agricultural. There were few straight lines, and the world was covered by tangled overgrown forest, home to deadly wild animals.

The most obvious representative of order in wilderness is in the sky. The sun rises and sets according to a predictable pattern dividing day and night. Depending on where you are on the earth, at midsummer the sun rises roughly North East, setting at the end of the day roughly North West. At mid-winter it rises roughly South East, and sets roughly South West. Days on which this event occurs are called *solstices*, which literally means “sun stands still”. Around solstice the sun rises in roughly the same spot on the horizon for five or six days before and after the day itself. The sun has reached the extremities of its sunrise and sunset positions, as far North as it will rise on midsummer’s day, as far to the South as it will rise on midwinter’s day. The lunar “Metonic” cycle is also predictable (although over the much longer period of 19.67 years) and has similar extreme rising and setting positions that may be marked using the same technique of alignment. Alignment to certain lunar or solar events is an important feature of some stone circles and chambered cairns.

A simple way to imagine the division of the horizon in Neolithic terms is to divide a circle with a diagonal St. Andrew's cross, creating a universal solar symbol that appears not only in British Neolithic rock art, but in archaic cultures worldwide (*Fig. 16*).

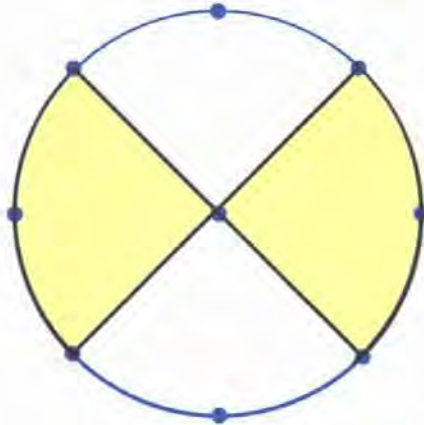


Figure 16. The division of the horizon upon solar extremes

Other significant positions in the solar year include the days of Vernal and Autumnal Equinox, when the day and night are exactly evenly split and the sunrise and sunset are due East and West<sup>49</sup>, and the other two cardinal directions: North, the fixed point around which the night sky spins, and South, which follows the sky's solar zenith line. Neolithic architecture seldom was aligned to either North or South, but tending toward the solar extremes.

It is productive to note the different aspects of each division of the horizon: the Eastern Quarter is the area where the sun appears from beneath the horizon at sunrise; the Western Quarter is where it sets. The Northern quarter of the sky is un-touched by the sun, nor is its horizon graced by sunrise or sunset. The horizon of the Southern quarter is untouched by rise or set, but crossed by the sun every day.

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<sup>49</sup> West Kennett Long Barrow is aligned with its entrance to the East. East Kennet is on an approximately NW – SE axis (Winter Solstice sunrise – Summer Solstice sunset).

There may be symbolic interpretations of events in the sky that were used by Neolithic man in the layout of stone circles and chambered mounds, but it is impossible to state with certainty what the metaphors and legends of a vanished culture may have been. Some features may be hinted at, for example, an association of the North with coldness and the night seems appropriate, as does the South with warmth and daytime, while the solstices and equinoxes conveniently mark the beginnings, endings and middles of seasons, of importance to hunter-gatherers and early agrarians alike. Because the horizon can be used to mark the passing of the year its use in calendar making is a feature common to the early history of developed cultures worldwide.

The Neolithic mind appears to have determined the sunrise and sunset at the solstices to be particularly important in their experience of the cosmos. It is impossible to make a study of the Neolithic in Britain without deferring to the weight of evidence toward solar observation as a fundamental to the culture. Clive Ruggles<sup>50</sup> and the Thoms<sup>51</sup> have represented effectively the Archaeo-Astronomical debate on either side.

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<sup>50</sup> Ruggles, 1999.

<sup>51</sup> Thom, 1954, 1967, 1971 etc.

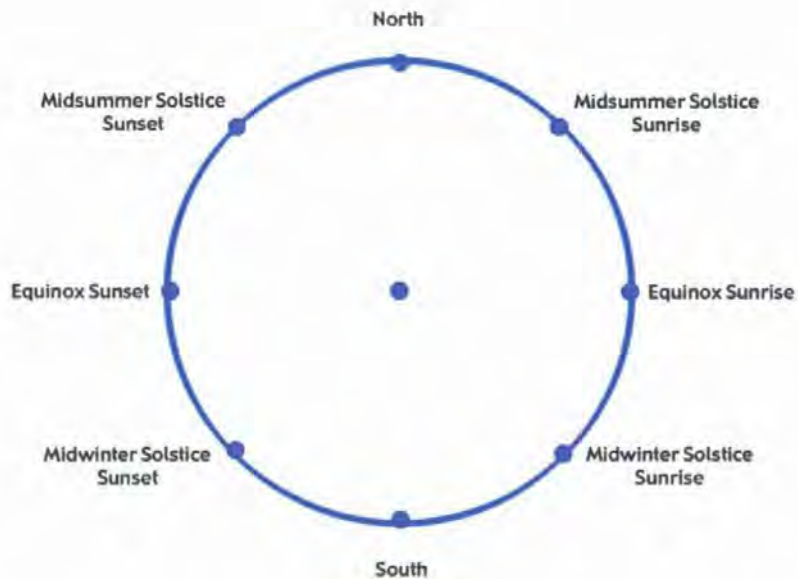


Figure 17. Solar Geometry

It is a simple matter to map a diagram that expresses how the Neolithic British mind perceived the basic geometry of the world; I refer to this patterning in my own creative practice, particularly in the Solar Cross and when preparing the gallery for the opening reception by taping the solstice line. I also use this method for aligning labyrinths.

There are six points on the horizon that are deeply significant in the simplest Neolithic astronomical observation: the solstice sunrises and sunsets, and the two equinoxes (*Fig. 17*). Major structures are carefully aligned to these events: in the South of England West Kennett Long Barrow is aligned to the equinoctial axis, and we can see the famous and careful solstice alignments at Newgrange, Maes Howe, Stonehenge and numerous other locations. In this figure the horizon is shown as a blue circle, with

the observer as a central point, marking the key events of solar movement on the horizon line.

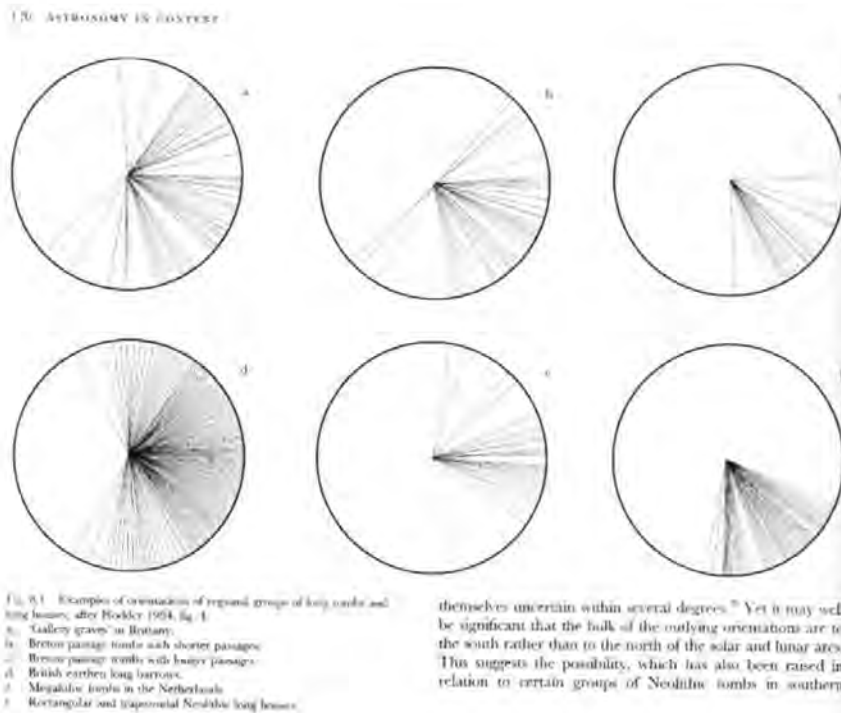


Figure 18. Illustration from Clive Ruggles' *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland*.

Making a comparison of the alignments of Neolithic chambered mounds in different areas may be helpful. The illustration here (*Fig. 18*) shows the variety of orientations that megalithic builders used in the construction of the structures.

Clearly the accurate alignments found in the major constructions are the exception not the rule, but equally clear is the intentional cosmogony in constructing the monuments aimed toward chosen sections of the sky. If this had been a random event, we would expect the distribution to be scattered around the circle, which is not the case. It is almost as if additional emphasis was placed upon the geomantic arrangement of

the major structures while less significant efforts were not created with such care and precision.

The sun rises in the Eastern quarter with the movement of the sun describing an arc across the Southern sky varying in height throughout the year. The sun sets in a mirror image of its Eastern rise in the Western quarter. The alignments seen in Ruggles' illustration (*Fig. 18*) clearly follow a trend of alignment toward the Eastern quarter, suggesting that the people who built Breton "gallery graves", British Earthen Long Barrows and Megalithic structures in the Netherlands were interested in associating their chambered mounds with the rising sun. The people who built Neolithic Long houses, the Orcadian homes studied by Richards, and Breton passage tombs, were particularly interested in facing the South East, perhaps simply in an effort to maximize the heat of the rising winter sun within their dwellings more than to express religious attitudes. However, a similar pattern of alignment emerges in the chambered mounds inventoried by Davidson and Henshall (*Fig. 19*). If such alignments were present only in residential structures one might be tempted to dismiss the idea of these alignments as an expression of cosmogony, but because they appear in irrational stone circles and earthworks it is hard to do so.



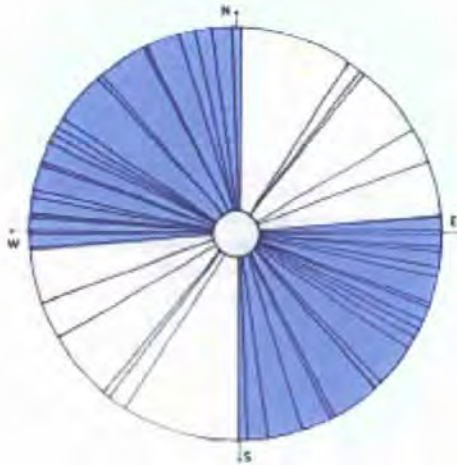


Figure 19. Expanded Version of alignment axes of Orcadian Chambered Cairns. NW – SE Axial alignment emphasised. (Adapted from Henshall in Davidson and Henshall 1989)

We might detect traces of the veneration of the sun and moon in British folk traditions: the sun and moon were saluted in Britain as late as the mid-nineteenth century, recorded by Alexander Carmichael in his *Carmina Gadelica*:

*"The people hailed the morning sun as they would a great person come back to their land; and they hailed the new moon "lochran mor an aigh"(the great lamp of grace) with joyous welcome and acclaim. The sun was to them a matter of great awe, but the moon was a friend of great love, guiding their course upon land and sea and their path wherever they went."<sup>52</sup>*

For the contemporary artist, solar alignment offers interesting opportunities for creating art that becomes part of an aligned landscape, resulting in the inclusion of the earth into the work.

<sup>52</sup> Carmichael 1994, 630.



Figure 20. Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels, Lucin, Utah. Photographer unknown

Nancy Holt, the wife of Robert Smithson and a major figure in “earth art” in the nineteen-seventies created her Sun Tunnel within this framework (*Fig. 20*). The piece is aligned on the solstice sunrises and sunsets and has holes drilled into the pipes to capture sun cast images of the constellations Draco, Perseus, Columba and Capricorn.<sup>53</sup> James Turrell is making a massive work at the Roden crater in the Painted Desert that introduces astronomical alignments to the reshaped impact crater. I will not dwell on these projects at any great length, because they refer to a general interest in global archaeo-astronomy rather than the British Neolithic arena in particular.

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<sup>53</sup> Lippard 106



Figure 21. Installing the tape solstice line. Photo by Mark Tevis

When the *Cabinet* was installed in the gallery I checked on the compass bearing of the space, finding to my pleasure that the space was aligned on a North South axis. Using orthographic projection I calculated the direction of the solstice sunrises and sunsets and laid the solar cross outside the gallery so that it was aligned to the rise and set of the solstice sun<sup>54</sup>.

In order to make the gallery represent Neolithic sacred space I used the results of the orthographic projection that I had made for the Solar Cross piece outside to stretch a tape diagonally across the floor in the direction of the summer solstice (*Fig. 21*).

On the South entrance doors I positioned a large photographic print of a scan I made of a doughnut. Although my choice of the doughnut was certainly tongue in cheek, the visitors to the gallery were thus passing through a vulva-like opening to the

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<sup>54</sup> Orthographic projection is a method of figuring out the direction of solar solstices without waiting for the actual event to come along. It should be used with caution because the shape of the horizon will alter the position of the sunrise according to the rise and fall of the land.

gallery. I made no effort to explain either line or doughnut, but used the process of creation as a personal ritual to “ground” the gallery in the same way that the Neolithic mounds were aligned to solar events. People who came to the gallery were therefore participating, without their knowledge, in a rite of passage initiating them into a first step toward understanding their ancient heritage.

### **Symbols from Geomancy**

*Neolithic Geomantic Man (Fig. 22)* is an anthropomorphic attempt to express the cosmogony of Neolithic man. Like the Vitruvian man made famous by Leonard Da Vinci it is an expression of the hermetic principle “as above, so below” in which an idealised image of man represents cosmic principles. In this case the principles are those that are inherent in the architecture of stone circles, artificial caves, and the rock art of the period. The symbolic “language” I have developed is based on shapes that appear in nature, particularly in the movement of the sun. Rene Guenon, whose work was referred to earlier, has influenced my choice here, particularly with his comment:

*... True Symbolism, far from having been artificially invented by man, is to be found in nature herself, or rather, that the whole of nature amounts to no more than a symbol of the transcendent realities.<sup>55</sup>*

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<sup>55</sup> Guenon 2001, 22



Figure 22. Neolithic Geomantic Man (96" x 72" Birch panel, Composite Gold leaf, Gold Leaf, Composite Silver Leaf, Bole, Adhesive, Oil paint)

Guenon notes the importance of the solar cross as a fundamental symbol and develops the significance of it by including the up and down directions, with the result of a three dimensional cross pointing above, below, forward, backward, to the left and to the right. According to Guenon this symbol positions man in the cosmos and can be found in archaic cultures worldwide<sup>56</sup>. In the Welsh tradition, which perhaps represents the direct inheritance of Neolithic practices, the world axis is shown passing through

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<sup>56</sup> Guenon 2001, 22

three circular realms; the human world *Cylch y Abred* or Middle Earth in the centre, *Annwn* below, and *Cylch y Gwynvyd* above<sup>57</sup>. Guenon points out that the disc is the extension of the four directions and may be concluded as a sphere representing the cosmos, which he refers to as *The Universal Spherical Vortex*<sup>58</sup>. The circular shape of most Neolithic British monuments illustrates this observation, placing them as microcosmic expressions in the landscape of the cosmos about them. The construction of circular mounds like Newgrange and Maes Howe (to name only two of the thousands found in Britain) reflects the continuation of the visible mound on and above the ground into the underworld beneath. Following this train of thought to its conclusion we might imagine that the circular cairns were perceived as spheres extended below ground, with central chambers at the centre of the microcosmic structure. Rites of passage held within the chamber therefore are taking place at the symbolic centre of creation, including not only the land of the living, but that of the underworld and the realm of spirits as well.

The circle with a central mark may be seen then to express man observing the cosmos, centred in the universe. Indeed, we find the centred circle well represented in decorative rock art, as simple cup and ring marks and with a "tail" penetrating the opened circumference in more complex patterns. Perhaps this fundamental symbol is the religious expression of cosmological centring, used to remind man of his place in and dependence upon the benefice of the universe.

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<sup>57</sup> Pennick 1996, 13.

<sup>58</sup> Guenon 2001, 101

Having established that there was an observance of the geometry of the sunrise and sunset throughout the year a series of shapes derived from this can be created. The most elementary of these are shown here.

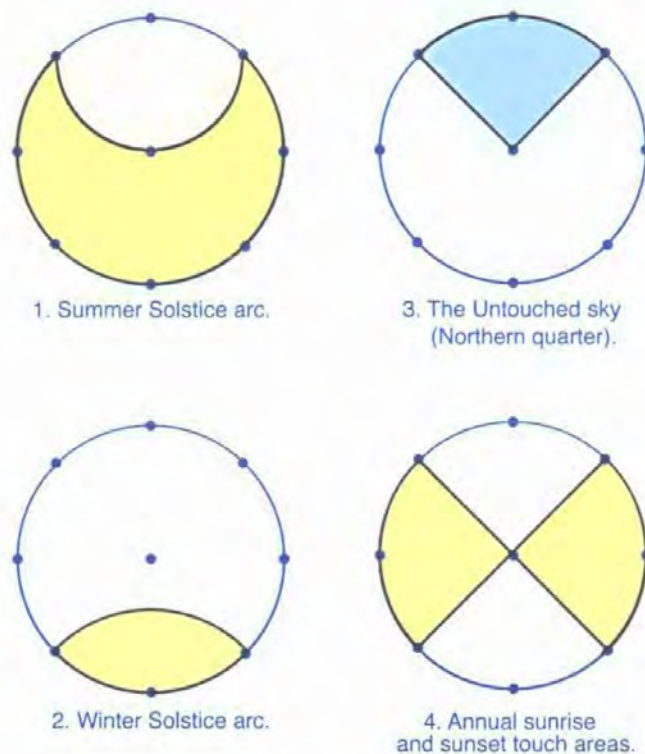


Figure 23. Elementary Solar Symbols

These are the simplest of designs based on solar solstice events, corresponding to the vesica pisces, the labrys, the crescent and the solar cross.

Ruggles points out the potential significance of the rising and setting of the moon.<sup>59</sup> In this diagram the major and minor limits of the moonrise and set are shown.

<sup>59</sup> Ruggles 1999, 37.

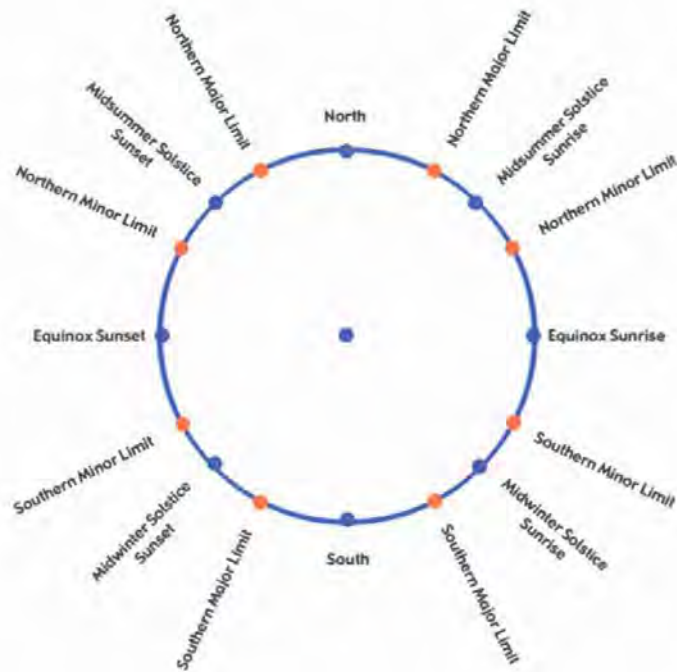
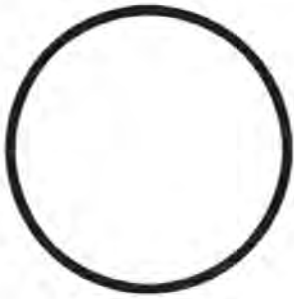


Figure 24. Major Lunar and Solar Extremes.

I have used the shapes suggested by the alignments of Neolithic geomancy to develop my own rudimentary symbolic language for use particularly in creating my painted work. These are intended as creative responses to the art and architecture of the Neolithic period, not interpretations of Neolithic cosmogony. I presently choose not to use them in the mixed media work unless they are inherent in the object, for example the spirals in the *Snake Box* pieces (Fig. 114, 115), or the *Grails* cups (Fig. 117, 118). I suspect that cup and ring marks were painted after being carved, but there can be no archaeological proof of this, any evidence of pigmentation having long ago eroded away.





a. Sun. Full moon. Pupil. Fruit. Light



c. Sun or Moon with halo. Eye. Nipple.



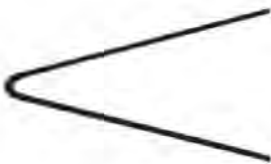
d. Crescent Moon. Bull horns. Solar or Lunar eclipse.  
Where the sun sets / rises (inverted).



e. Star. Planet. Pebble. Mole on skin. Simple Mark.  
Pupil of eye. Navel.



f. Snail shell. Seashell. Animal horn. Fern. Whirlpool. Whirlwind. Sun. A quarter-year. Fire festival.



g. Comet. Phallus. Pile of sand.



h. Rainbow. The North, Cold, Death.

Figure 25. Simple symbols found in *Neolithic Geomantic Man*

In the oil painting sunrise and sunset are described on opposite sides of a circular horizon (Fig. 22). The right side of the painting is where the sun rises over the course of a year, the left where it sets. The top of the circle is silvered, because I associate silver with moonlight and night; for similar reasons the bottom quarter is gilded because of associations with sunshine and day. The hermaphrodite figure has six arms, each dividing the horizon at a key solar event; from top right, summer solstice sunrise, the two equinox sunrises (in one place, naturally), and the winter solstice sunrise. On the left side, anti-clockwise from the top: the summer solstice sunset, the equinoxes, and the winter solstice sunset. The circle of the horizon contains a spiral that originates from the centre of the Geomantic man, shaping and layering the geometry of the solar divisions.



Figure 26. Details from Neolithic Geomantic Man. Photos by Michael Pearce

In the course of making the piece it occurred to me that the division of the sky into North, South, East and West is a feature of Western civilisation that need not apply to the Neolithic. It seems more likely that the sky in the East was thought more important than the North in the cosmogony of these people, because they were so dependent on the reliability of the sun.

Spirals are often found in Neolithic art, and have a unique relationship to the movement of the sun. Artist Charles Ross has made a wonderful space based on his rediscovery that the sun describes a double spiral as it passes through the sky in the course of a year (*Fig. 27*).



Figure 27. Charles Ross's 'The Year of the Solar Burns' at the Salon Verte of the Chateau d'Oiron, France

To make the piece Ross took a lens that he positioned on a rooftop, allowing the sun to burn its course into a plank each day. Passing clouds interrupted the burns, leaving gaps, while totally overcast days resulted in blank boards. When the curves thus burned into the wood were laid end-to-end Ross found that they created the double spiral seen on the tiled floor in the photograph above. Perhaps this artist has exposed the meaning of a common symbol of Neolithic rock carving, additionally revealing the sophisticated observations of Neolithic Britons. Double spirals show up in plenty at Newgrange and Knowth, associated with the clever solar alignments of those places.

### **Decoration: Cups, Rings and Wiggly Lines**

I pursued my exploration of Neolithic abstract symbolism that resembled natural phenomena into the modern academic arena. The Rock Art Pilot Project Report commissioned by English Heritage in January 2000 represents the most current record of the state of British rock art, excluding recent dramatic discoveries in Yorkshire and the subsequent publication of Graeme Chappell and Paul Brown's *Prehistoric Rock Art in the North Yorkshire Moors*. The Pilot Project makes a clear distinction between decorative marks made in the Neolithic and those made in the Mesolithic or the Bronze or Iron Ages, then further draws the boundaries by defining rock art thus:

*Any artificially created mark that is cut, engraved, incised etched, gouged, ground or pecked into, or applied with paint, wax, or other substances onto a rock surface.*<sup>60</sup>

The term "cup and ring marks" has been used since the Victorian antiquarian period to describe the most common prehistoric British carvings: circular depressions and grooves cut into stone by repeated chipping, or "pecking" with a harder hand sized rock,

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<sup>60</sup> Rock Art Pilot Project, Main Report, 2000, 12.

quite probably with a pointed end, and used in much the same way as a modern chisel. Although commonly described as “rock art”, the term “art” does not accurately describe the markings which probably were not made with the same set of critical values as those we apply to them. Because we lack the social structures to allow us to comprehend the symbolism (if there was any) of the cup and ring marks, we will never be able to adequately interpret them, but must be content with careful studies of placement, motifs and manufacturing technique. Perhaps because of the tendency to understand the past as a foreign country, art historians have avoided critical assessment of the rock art that has survived, preferring to leave assessment of the panels to the empirical methods of Archaeologists. This is not to say that there have not been a multitude of attempts to interpret the carvings, but art criticism has not reached into the Neolithic. “Art” in the twenty-first Century cannot be viewed as a perpetual concept, being the construct of academic and commercial interests that have become highly developed over several centuries; we can be sure that four and a half thousand years ago people did not assess the worth of a panel of rock art by its authorship, authenticity or market value.

Because of the archaeological context of some of the pieces found in chambered mounds we can be reasonably certain that these patterns were made in the Neolithic period, with use continuing into the early Bronze Age. The impressive work of Northumberland resident Stan Beckenshall has done more than any other to advance rock art study and documentation in Britain, and it is to him that any student of British rock art must turn for introduction. Beckenshall divides British rock art into symbols and

motifs, defining "symbol" as "a single element such as a cup"<sup>61</sup> while "motif" is "a combination of symbols".<sup>62</sup> A well-developed panel might include several motifs, each with a variety of symbols.

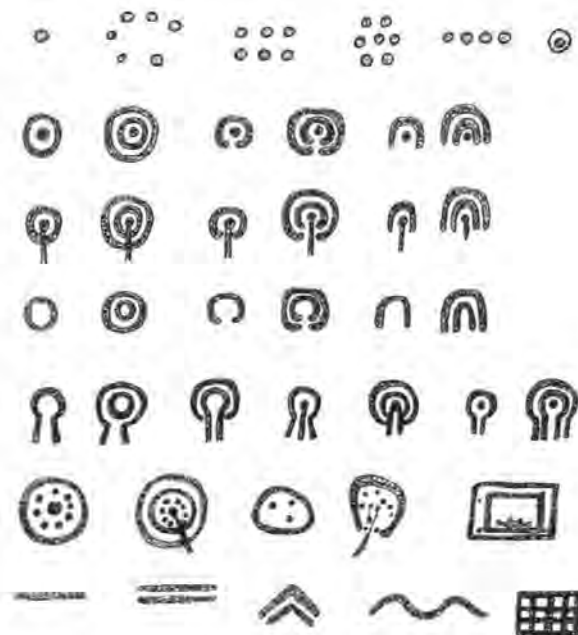


Figure 28. Elements of British rock art by Stan Beckenshall

The impression one gains from prolonged study of these works is one of complete bewilderment, first at our complete and utter inability to interpret the symbolism, and second at the effort expended to create the panels. Beckenshall emphasizes that these are indeed symbolic expressions, rather as a cross is a Christian symbol, bearing a far deeper meaning for a Christian than being a simple "t" shape<sup>63</sup>; we are trying to interpret these meanings based on a lost cosmogony.

In the *Elements of British Rock Art* illustration (Fig 28) there appears to be a preponderance of female symbols, similar to some of those interpreted by Maria

<sup>61</sup> Beckenshall 2002, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Beckenshall, 1999, 34

Gimbutas as feminine sexual imagery that represents a goddess. (Gimbutas is not without her critics, not least because she finds evidence for the goddess in every chevron on every decorated pot in Neolithic Europe.)

If a schematic view of the elements is taken, the dot may be seen as the individual, and a dot in a circle may be seen as an existential statement of an individual's place in the perceived cosmos, or within the circular horizon. Perhaps we might infer that the doubled, or tripled circle implies a Neolithic understanding of the cosmos as a tiered structure including an afterlife, or other world. This would seem appropriate in view of the hierarchical nature of stone circles and earthen enclosures and their association with the ancestors noted elsewhere. If Celtic beliefs are indeed the ideological descendant of indigenous Neolithic cosmogony we may see parallels between their three tiered over- and under-worlds, and the world within which we live.

This theme may be carried to the gestures made in the landscape by Neolithic people; there are simple correspondences between the circles of stone and earthen enclosures, beyond the superficial resemblances found in plan views of such sites. Physically experiencing the sites re-affirms the Neolithic view: In August 2006 I spent a delightful week working to understand the Neolithic landscape of Avebury by making ten-mile hikes to the circle from each of the cardinal directions. Coming in from the North I almost inevitably climbed Windmill Hill then rested and ate a packed lunch resting on top of the round mound at the summit. As I enjoyed the peace and took the time for my legs to recover from the ascent I noticed that the entire hill *feels* as though it is in the centre of the surrounding circular bowl of land, that the hill itself is a circular hill, that the Windmill Hill Causewayed Enclosure *feels* like a circular perimeter, and the



mound is a circle within these concentric circles, although on the map the site appears nothing like this.

This is the same schematic image as the circle often found as a motif in Neolithic rock art. Similar experiences may be had at stone circles, where the enclosed experience of being at the centre of the circle belies the fact that no stone circles are perfectly circular<sup>64</sup>. Neolithic man didn't use maps and had no opportunities for aerial views, so I find interpretations of the sites that are based on these views rather irritating.

A theme of penetration appears to run through the works, with a phallic line either entering or crossing circular enclosures. Repeated themes may perhaps be interpreted as a phallus penetrating a vagina, while "O" shapes and inverted "U"'s may have female sexual origins. A Freudian viewer might make a sexual interpretation here, concluding that the symbols represent hereditary "trees", but the theory lacks consistency that becomes apparent immediately on observing the extraordinary variety of compositional variations of the elements.

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<sup>64</sup> The Thoms went to extraordinary lengths to attempt to prove their theory of megalithic geometry and the megalithic yard by making exceptional surveys of many stone circles. Although I am delighted that they took the time to survey the sites, providing the best plans of stones circles ever made, I have not been impressed with their theories, because of their very relaxed approach to their claims for the placement of the stones on their plans, where stones are frequently missing, or are inconsistently arranged on the line they have placed.



Figure 29. Variations Upon the Elements of British Rock Art by Stan Beckenshall

Here, in Beckenshall's *Variations upon the Elements of British Rock Art* (Fig. 29) the problem of interpretation becomes most apparent. Simplistic attempts to find the meaning of abstract art are futile in all eras, not least our own; how much more futile is the attempt to come to a definitive solution to the rock art of five thousand years ago? However, there are themes we can note: a variety of probable solar symbols appear, including the six pronged solar cross, the sun image with the four armed cross and dots, and several images that appear to represent phallic themes and repetitions of the theme of penetration. There is a tendency towards curved shapes, perhaps because there are so few straight lines in the natural world. Circles and dots predominate.

Lewis-Williams has claimed that Palaeolithic rock art was produced by shamans inspired by entheogen created images; noting the similarity of some of the motifs to phosphene imagery seen moving on the eyelids when one's eyes are closed, he

believes that shamans' hallucinations were recorded in the panels<sup>65</sup>. His research, including experiments with LSD, Marijuana, Barbiturates, "Magic Mushrooms" and Mescaline, supports a theory that psychedelic drugs intensify phosphene imagery, but fails to prove strong evidence of a shamanic connection to the production of palaeolithic art. Nevertheless, some of his recordings of phosphene imagery present striking resemblances to some Neolithic British rock art motifs; perhaps these images were interpreted by Neolithic man as messages that required a record in the form of rock art panels.

Because similarities between the rock art and phosphene image models are *only* similarities, I can conclude that experiments with phosphenes as source imagery may be helpful in the production of contemporary art based on the Neolithic model, but hesitate to concede that the Neolithic images were produced by shamans.

### **Interpreting Neolithic Rock Art**

Here are three renderings of the same site. The first is a photograph, the second a drawing and the third a written description.

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<sup>65</sup> Lewis-Williams, 2002a, 163-189

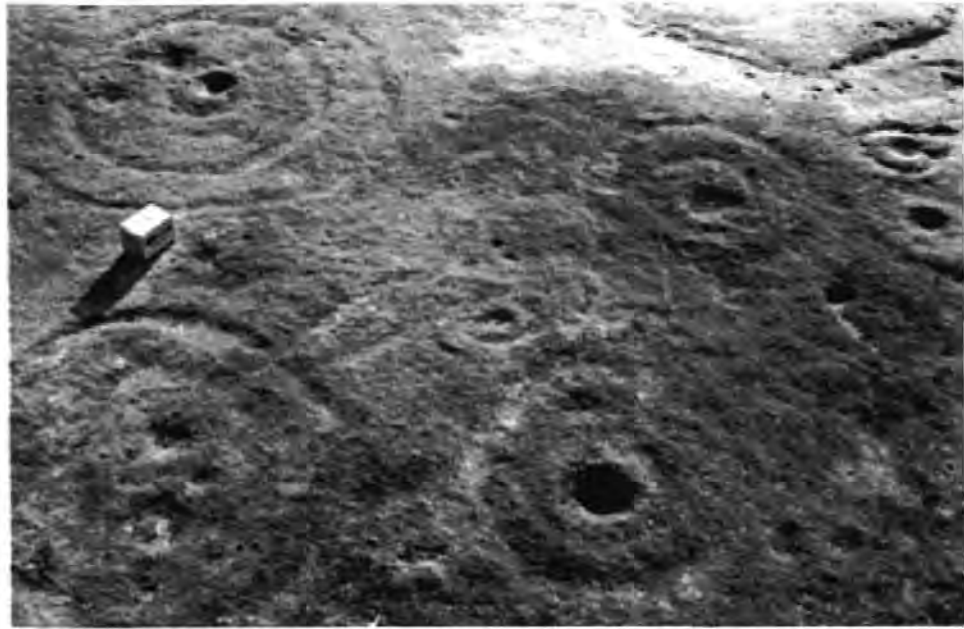


Figure 30. Rock art found at Amerside Law. Photo by Stan Beckenshall

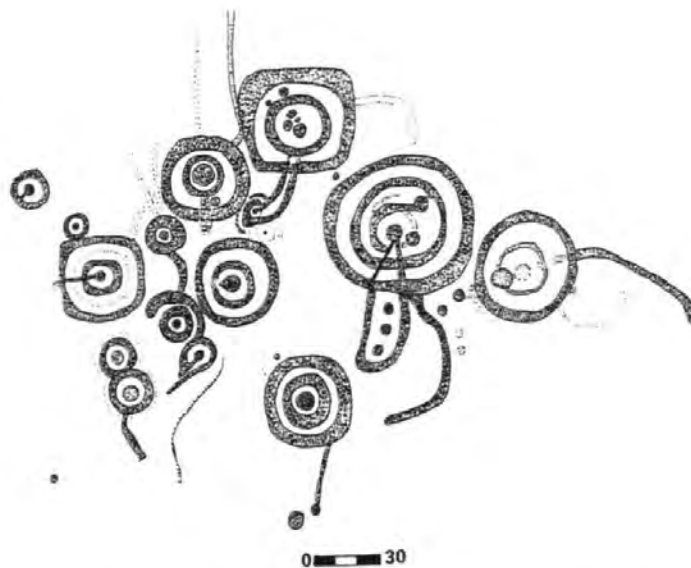


Figure 31. Rock art found at Amerside Law. Drawing by Stan Beckenshall

Beckenshall's commentary on the panel:

*This rock is a good example of how basic symbols used all over the county can be arranged in such a way that an individual result is produced. The largest figure has a central cup from which two grooves of*

*different thicknesses lead down and loop together, enclosing a row of three cups. There may have been three other cups already before the design was made which could have been incorporated into the rest, which is three widely spaced concentric rings around a central cup. A curved groove leads from the outer circle, flanked by two cups.<sup>66</sup>*

We have seen Beckenshall's own drawing and photograph side by side with his verbal description of the same piece. My juxtaposition of descriptions highlights the difficulty of interpreting rock art panels: none of the three reductions is a truthful representation of the actual panel, nor can any photograph, drawing or rendering be anything but a limited description of the experience of an object. The three interpretations of the stone in its landscape are each lacking, as the true experience of rock art in the landscape includes the journey to get to the panel, the situation of the piece within the broader landscape, the physical experience of the wind, rain, sun and air temperature, the colour of the sky, the wetness of the land. The difficulties of description add to the sense of obscurity, not only of these fragments of Neolithic culture, but of all archaeological sites.

Picasso is said to have been at a dinner party when a guest criticised his work for being unrealistic. The painter kept quiet until the same guest produced a photo of his girlfriend, at which point Pablo said "Is she really this small?" Judging the work of Neolithic rock carvers as if they were creating art within a 21<sup>st</sup> Century conceptual framework is a mistake.

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<sup>66</sup> Beckenshall, Site Notes. [http://rockart.ncl.ac.uk/panel\\_detail.asp?pi=238](http://rockart.ncl.ac.uk/panel_detail.asp?pi=238) Accessed June 10<sup>th</sup> 2006

While the majority of prehistoric British rock art is found in the North, with a concentration of examples in Northumberland and Scotland this perception may give an inaccurate picture of the distribution of rock art in Britain during the Neolithic and early Bronze Age; in fact there are many examples of rock art in the South, but there appears to be a negligible incidence of the work found in the landscape on outcrops. In Wessex this has been explained by the very soft and quickly eroded chalk that prevails in the region; and while there is no lack of glacial erratic sarsens of the kind used to make both Stonehenge and Avebury circles, sarsen is such a tough material to shape that stone-workers swear about it, not by it. Pete Glastonbury, a well-known amateur megalithic researcher recently noted that the only thing he could think of to use for cutting cup and ring marks into sarsen was meteorite stone, tempered by the atmosphere. (He also noted that he had found meteorite stones near to the marked sarsen Polissoir stone at Fyfield down.)<sup>67</sup>



Figure 32. Chalk Cup at Devizes Museum 2006 Photo by the Author

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<sup>67</sup> Personal email Spring 2006

Cup marks need not be carved into earthfast boulders, indeed, excavations to the North of the Avebury complex at Windmill Hill, which we have seen to be intimately connected to the monument, revealed little chalk carved cups like those in Figure 32, less than ten centimetres across, and with two centimetre wide hollows. These may be similar in function to the many cup marked stone cobbles found in several excavations of chambered cairn mounds, including Hinderwell Beacon in Yorkshire, which contained over 150 of these odd stones when excavated in 1919.<sup>68</sup> Discs with shaped edges were also found at Windmill Hill, and thirty carved stone balls that may have functioned as fertility symbols, having been found with four chalk stones carved into phalli.<sup>69</sup>

Flint nodule cups were found among the curious artefacts buried with the Upton Lovell Shaman now displayed at Devizes Museum (*Fig. 33*). During my Southern approach to Avebury in August 2006 I spent some time field-walking and picked up a broken flint burin and a flint cup like those shown below.



Figure 33. Flint cups from Upton Lovell. 2006 Photo by the Author

<sup>68</sup> Beckenshall 2002, 140.

<sup>69</sup> Burl, 1979, 109.

I used the theme of repeated cups in my *Mr. Pearce's Cabinet of Neolithic Wonders* installation<sup>70</sup> in the *Grails*, consisting of roughly three hundred crude clay bowls, which were filled with beeswax. Presently the cups represent to me the individuals who once participated in Neolithic culture and have gone, but upon whom we are totally indebted for their survival, and their genes. Looking at these objects constantly reminds me of the absence of the people who made them; the remaining artefacts simply emphasize the lack of the people who used them. In addition there is a mythological element to the piece that notes the Holy Grail of Arthurian legends. Besides the purely practical uses to which a cup may be put, the shape fits with the Neolithic understanding of a circular cosmos, reflected in their choices of concentric circles and upturned half-spheres in the architectural works.

Sometimes rock art objects appear that are breathtakingly personal, like this piece of rock art from Poole farm in Dorset: a cist slab found with many footprints and some cup marks carved into its surface.

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<sup>70</sup> Kwan Fong Gallery, CLU, August 2006.





Figure 34. Poole Farm Cist Slab. Photo courtesy of Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery.

Sadly this piece cannot be dated, having no context, but it should be noted that it resembles later Iron Age work more than the cup and ring marks and spiral motifs associated with the Neolithic. For a thoroughly Neolithic piece we will need to visit Badbury, in Dorset, where a half-ton sandstone slab was rescued from destruction by antiquarians in the mid-nineteenth Century and found carved with five cup-marks, two daggers and two axes. Dorset was also the location of an exciting discovery of classic cups and rings found on the edge of Knowlton Southern Henge in Spring of 2000.

Cup and ring marks are not the only rock art of the Prehistoric period: representational art has been found. A multitude of daggers and an axe were carved into one of the sarsen Stonehenge trilithons (*Fig.35*), probably during the early Bronze Age. Now eroded to the point of being barely visible except with the help of powerful laser technology<sup>71</sup>, the carvings might show evidence of an axe cult associated with the

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<sup>71</sup> The Archaeoptics company uses a laser scanner capable of a resolution of 170 microns and can achieve accuracies of 50 microns, narrower than a human hair.

cultural transformation of the late Neolithic with the introduction of metal working.<sup>72</sup>

Similar axe carvings were found near Coombe Hill in Sussex.



Figure 35. Stonehenge Dagger and Axes. Laser scan produced by Archaeoptics.

At Fyfield Down, a sarsen covered field near Avebury that represents one of the only places in the area to resemble the local Neolithic landscape, there are two well-known pieces of rock carving. The first is a heavily cup marked stone, which is of disputed authenticity as the local sarsens are notoriously covered in the fossilized holes left by roots that once grew in the mud that was transformed into stone. The second is the undoubtedly authentic<sup>73</sup> “Pollissoir” stone with its odd grooved marks, thought to have been a sharpening stone for grinding and polishing stone tools (*Fig.36*). The Pollissoir stone is indisputably ancient, remains enigmatic and cannot be truly described as rock art, being more likely the result of tool preparation; the grooves in the surface are

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<sup>72</sup> Burl 1989, 206

<sup>73</sup> There is another stone in the Avenue with very similar markings on it, clearly made prior to its erection in the row because of the position of the grooves. If, as seems most likely, the Pollissoir stone is its contemporary this therefore places the carvings to a time predating the creation of the Avebury Avenue around 2300 BC.

thought to be the rubbing marks of ancient sharpening or buffing of hand axe or other tools. I am reminded once again that obscurity helps to make these works more memorable. In part, these carvings become more interesting because we don't understand them. The questions that remain unanswered allow our imaginations to create narrative "solutions" to the piece, which may or may not be truly intended as decorative art or simply the vestiges of tool making practices.



Figure 36. The Pollisoir Stone at Fyfield Down. Photo by the Author.

The Avebury Avenue of perhaps a hundred pairs of sarsen stones was erected about 2200 BC, perhaps as a ceremonial entrance to the megalithic circle and henge enclosure. The date is secure, confirmed by C-14 dating of charcoal found in an excavation in the early Twentieth Century. Sarsens were dragged into position and tilted into holes, then levered into a vertical position, rammed into their position and wedged with chalk blocks. Prior to its erection one of these sarsens had been used for

sharpening tools, just like the polissoir stone, the marks can clearly be seen in Figure 37. For the marks to have been made in situ seems unlikely, because of the awkward position of the marks, low to the ground.



Figure 37. Avebury Avenue Stone with markings made prior to its erection.  
Photo by the author

Rock art in the Wessex area is rare, but weathered and unrecorded examples can be found, although it is very difficult to detect bona fide cup and ring marks among the plethora of root holes in sarsens around the Avebury region.

At Wayland's Smithy on the edge of Oxfordshire there is a small but interesting candidate for a place in the discussion of Wessex rock art. A cup mark that probably originated as a natural root mark appears to have been altered to resemble a classic motif. I visited the site at night in August 2006 and photographed Fig. 38. The following picture has been digitally enhanced in red to make the pecking clear.



Figure 38. A rock art panel at Wayland's Smithy. The stone is lit from a single source at night, on the right enhanced in Adobe Photoshop. Photo and digital enhancement by the Author

Rock art in chambered cairns may have aided observers by providing a more precise arrangement for viewing the sun as it rose in alignment with the openings, and perhaps there were additional objects used in the chambers to help the leaders calculate the correct day. Martin Brennan suggests that the users of the passage of Loughcrew cairn T., nearby the great mounds Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, in the Boyne Valley, made that determination by counting days with the help of the relief carvings in the stones with reference to the light falling on the back stone of the aligned passage: perhaps these symbols were used to determine the exact day of solstice.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Brennan, 90

Carved Stone Balls (*Fig.39*) are the most enigmatic artefacts of the British Neolithic. No researcher has come up with a convincing explanation for their use, or even if they had a practical purpose. Suggestions have included fishing weights, game pieces, tokens of power, magical tools, astronomical devices, and druids' geometric solids.

The most inclusive study of stone balls to date is the catalogue created by Dorothy Marshall<sup>75</sup>, in which she suggests that because they are so seldom found in burial contexts, the balls may have had a ceremonial function related in some way to hereditary leadership; the balls would have been passed on from generation to generation. Whatever they were, they remain some of the most curious and delightful objects of the Neolithic.



Figure 39. Photo from the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Reproduced from Purse, 1974, p. 46.

Finally, but only with the greatest difficulty, it is possible to make a case for representational figurative Neolithic British art. In 1967 Anne Ross suggested that the

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<sup>75</sup> Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Volume 108 (1976-77), 63

Celtic cult of the head had deep roots into the Neolithic, making note of the appearance of chalk carvings of heads found in burial contexts at Folkton Wold and Mecklin Park dating from the Neolithic period.<sup>76</sup> She recorded a multitude of wooden gods remaining from the Iron Age, and as recorded elsewhere there may be a lineage between “Celtic” practices and those of the Neolithic period. Revolutionary developments in genetic studies of Mesolithic and Neolithic peoples in the British Isles strongly support the idea that this is in fact the case<sup>77</sup>. But Ian Longworth, a pottery expert, has argued that facial representations from the Neolithic are in fact so rare that there was a taboo on reproducing human faces<sup>78</sup>.

Supporting the figurative side of the discussion, Terrence Meaden believes that some Wessex megaliths were shaped to resemble human faces, pointing out natural and carved features in Avebury stones (*Fig. 40*) and a face carved into the West face of trilithon 54 at Stonehenge (*Fig. 41*) as examples. He suggests that the stones were painted to emphasize the natural features of the stone when they resembled humans. In Summer of 2006 he showed me where his favourite head at Avebury was hidden in plain sight upon one of the stones of the Cove:

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<sup>76</sup> Ross, 100.

<sup>77</sup> Especially Collis 2003, Oppenheimer 2006

<sup>78</sup> Archaeology Magazine, Issue 84, September / October 2005. Accessed online at <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/BA/ba84/news.shtml> on May 14th 2006.

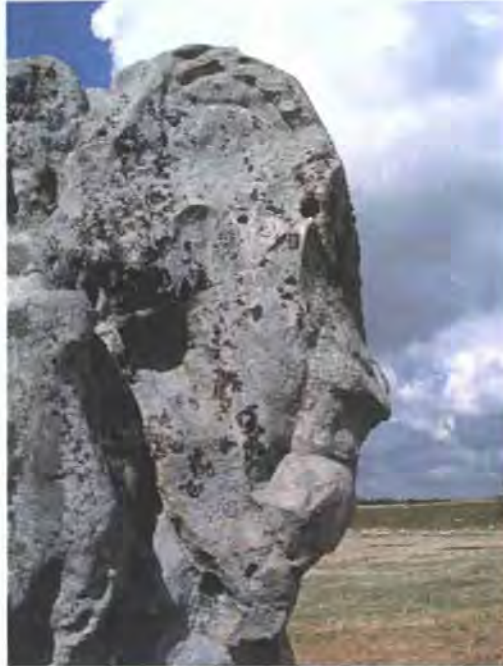


Figure 40. Meaden's "face" in the Cove stone at Avebury, 2006 Photo by the Author

Meaden's theory has been criticised because some of his faces are extremely hard to make out and rely on the sun hitting them at exactly the right time of day to cast shadows. The example above is his most convincing effort, featuring potentially carved horns curving out from the forehead, a shaped mouth and a good nose. Because we are imaginative creatures we tend to create representation where there is none, and although Meaden's theory that the Avebury head is carved is tempting, it is presently unproven and consigned to the fringes of conservative archaeology. His Stonehenge piece is impressive, as we know that pounding and grinding shaped the trilithons, but this example too may be an imaginative anthropomorphic response to carved features that unintentionally resemble a face.





Figure 41. Stonehenge Trilithon 54. Photo courtesy of Terence Meaden

However, a recent discovery in a cave in the French Vilhonneur forest of the oldest known human representation indicates that very early attempts at reductive representational art had been made in exactly the manner suggested by Meaden (*Fig. 42*).<sup>79</sup>



Figure 42. The oldest known portrait? The Upper Paleolithic cave painting of Vilhonneur. Photo courtesy of Associated Press.

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<sup>79</sup> Reported in the Deseret News on May 12, 2006. Accessed online at <http://deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,635212624,00.html> May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

When the Vilhonneur example came to light this year Meaden was delighted that archaeologists had recognized as authentic an example of a prehistoric anthropomorphic alteration of natural stone features similar to those he proposed in 1999.<sup>80</sup>

## **Colour**

Archaeologists have great difficulty in including colour in their description of the places they dig up. Because pigments leech into the ground and become indistinguishable from their surroundings it is a simple matter to overlook painting as a means of decoration. In Malraux's critical analysis of the renaissance vision of antiquity he notes the incorrect but popular assumption that the art of the classical past was colourless<sup>81</sup>. He refers, of course, to public perceptions of marble statues that survived the ages to become the models of the classical ideal for artists in the renaissance, who worked unaware of the polychrome finish applied to the statuary when it was originally displayed.

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<sup>80</sup> Personal email June 2006.

<sup>81</sup> Malraux, 1978, 47-50



Left: Figure 43. The *Venere in Bikini*, excavated in Pompeii. Photographer unknown.  
Right: Figure 44. The painted eye of the Amazon of Herculaneum, excavated in 2006 by Domenico Camardo. Photo by Riccardo Giordano

In much the same way that this misunderstanding of the finished products of the ancient masters led to an misunderstanding of classical art, the spaces of ancient Britain have been denuded of colour, as the revelation of Neolithic architectural achievements took place in the same moment of history as the revival of classical antiquity, where the lack of colour was a conforming ideal.

In my own practice I note that the natural palette offered by stone, plaster, wood, copper and wax is quite muted, leading me to think that ground pigments of brighter colour like ochres would have been impressive, particularly when used in grand scale,

as the work of Mary-Anne Oeoc suggests was the practice. Owoc is one of very few researchers who have investigated the use of colour in prehistoric structures<sup>82</sup>, noticing that Bronze age mounds were built using different coloured layers of soil and proposing a ritual process of construction. Our picture of Bronze Age monuments in South West Britain is radically altered by her observation that mounds in her study were built with yellow clay surfaces; a decorative feature that would have made a prominent impression upon the landscape.<sup>83</sup> The white chalk of structures like Silbury must have been spectacular, rising out of the woodland as one approached Avebury. The chequered quartzite of Newgrange must have glowed in contrast with the green hills of the Boyne Valley.

A different colouring of surface material was present at the Camster Long chambered cairn, this from the excavation report:

“A single convincing pit was located within the south-west forecourt, clearly covered by the forecourt blocking. It was 450 mm in diameter and 150 mm deep. It contained a fill of black soil surrounded and underlain by grey soil which, in turn, was surrounded and underlain by red soil. Flecks of charcoal were present throughout.”<sup>84</sup>

How do we interpret such layers of colour? Certainly the context is ritual. Owoc relies on ethnographic reports from all over the world to defend colour in ritual use, suggesting that different colours may have indicated different stages in the age of children<sup>85</sup>.

Perhaps part of the ritual process of becoming a man was to be coloured with clay or ash as Eliade describes. Ochre coloured bones are found in Neolithic burials,

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<sup>82</sup> See Owoc 1999

<sup>83</sup> Ibid 9

<sup>84</sup> Masters 1997, 132

<sup>85</sup> Owoc 1999, 3. Owoc particularly refers to the rites of initiation of males of the Nuba, in Central Sudan

suggesting a ritual association of red haematite with the blood of the living<sup>86</sup>. Burl suggests that ochre was used to colour wood post circles, which would have profoundly affected the appearance of these structures<sup>87</sup>.

Associated with this discussion of Neolithic colour, Richard Bradley has noted a third kind of rock art found in the Orkadian chambered cairns of Quoyness and Cuween.<sup>88</sup>

In these panels the art is scratched into the rock in a manner that Bradley finds suggestive of preliminary sketches made for long-eroded paintings. The motifs in these pieces are more reminiscent of marks on grooved ware pottery than of more typical cup and ring work, and cup and ring marks tend to be on higher ground, and in the open air, or upon later Neolithic / early bronze age cist slabs that are hidden underground within mounds for the dead to see, while these scratched marks are found where they can be seen by the living, both here in the cairns and within homes at Skara Brae. Colin Richards' work comparing the houses of the living to those of the dead, referred to in the chapter on fire in this work, is perhaps enhanced by this similarity.

During an archaeological excavation at Stonehenge Bottom in 1969 a pit was found to contain two thin chalk plaques about 2 1/2 inches long, with typically Neolithic lozenge shapes, triangles and chevrons carved into them.<sup>89</sup> Again, these appear to have more in common with the scratched marks noted by Bradley than with the cup and ring marks. Were they too once painted? I choose to use a very limited palette for my three-dimensional work, dictated by the materials used to make the pieces: wood, plaster (as white as the Wiltshire chalk downs) ash and copper.

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<sup>86</sup> For example: Burl 1979, 123

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 169

<sup>88</sup> Bradley 1998, 387

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

## Neolithic and Contemporary Architectures of Making: Cosmogony

Archaeologists approach ancient spaces with a particular world view which effects the way that their work is understood. So-called “New Archaeology” is part scientific analysis, part hard labour. Detailed plans are made to show the precise placement of artefacts, geo-physical surveys are made to aid understanding plans of structures, typologies of pottery shards are laboriously created by hard-working professors and curators working alone, classifying the remains of material culture they study. This work is immensely helpful in helping us to understand the debris of a lost culture, but the quantitative archaeological approach is not the *only* approach. Aaron Watson offers a useful comparison of the roles of Ethnographers and Archaeologists, suggesting that Ethnographers cover some of the same ground that archaeologists do, but that their observation of living contemporary cultures allows them to observe ceremonies and describe the roles of different performers, their costumes, their use of their spaces, texts followed, movements made. Whereas ethnographers describe the variety of ritual experiences, archaeologists provide a record of the venues. Summing up the merits of applying ethnography to archaeology Watson declares: “Non-interpretive archaeology has left us with a catalogue of dead monuments”<sup>90</sup>. The ethnographic approach offers insight into action that archaeology cannot offer, but the monumental Neolithic spaces that archaeologists explore were certainly used for ritual, so the challenge to archaeologists is to attempt to reconstruct what was done in addition to their creation of the record of material remains. As an approach to this present interpretation of

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<sup>90</sup> Watson 2001, 179.

megalithic remains as performance spaces this is helpful and guides the research in this chapter, which includes information drawn from Archaeological and Ethnographical sources.

From the 1970's until the 1990's it had been the view of many archaeologists that astronomy was of over-riding importance to the builders of stone circles, but as we have seen, despite obsessive observations and surveying (most notably by Alexander Thom) this opinion has lost its pre-eminence to a more general notion of alignment in the landscape and broader environment. Because people built spaces that had apparent connections to the cosmos may not necessarily mean that they perceived the cosmos in Descartes' rational terms. In fact, by assuming an understanding of stone circles and chambered cairns as solar temples we are applying modern criteria to an ancient world-view, which perhaps saw the cosmos in mythical terms that may be more appropriately viewed through an objective study as the remnants of archaic religion than through the study of archaeo-astronomy.

Mercia Eliade made a Phenomenological study of ancient and modern liminal events. His books *The Sacred and the Profane*<sup>91</sup> and *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*<sup>92</sup> are essential texts for the student of archaic religion, wherein Eliade makes some well-defended generalizations about the ritual practices of archaic religions that may be applied to Neolithic British structures. His observations may be used as a way of understanding what was being done within their chambers and circles, and may provide insight into why they were built in the way they were. Here he makes an astute observation about myth:

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<sup>91</sup> Eliade, 1957

<sup>92</sup> Eliade, 1958

*"To know the myths is not (as was thought in the past century) to become aware of the regularity of certain cosmic phenomena (the course of the sun, the lunar cycle, the rhythm of vegetation and the like); it is, first of all, to know what the Gods and the civilizing heroes did – their works, adventures, dramas. Thus it is to know a divine history – which nonetheless remains a "history", that is, a series of events that are unforeseeable, though consistent and significant."<sup>93</sup>*

He puts his finger on what is troubling with the archaeo-astronomical approach to interpreting chambered cairns, megaliths and circles. Because there is an observance of the events of the sun inherent in the constructions does not necessarily mean that these events are *central* to the users of the spaces. In fact the sun should be seen through the eyes of a prehistoric person as a mythical being, a projection of internalized beliefs, not as a scientifically analyzed body of exploding gases. In Jung's terms:

*All the mythologized processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, the rainy season, and so forth, are in no sense allegories of these objective occurrences; rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to men's consciousness by way of projection – that is mirrored in the events of nature.<sup>94</sup>*

Astronomical alignments certainly do exist in prehistoric stone circles and cairns and they appear to have played an important part in the use of many of them, but we must drop the modern lens with which we peer into the Neolithic, and attempt an approach with the eyes of an objective observer, examining the phenomena that remain in order to understand the uses of the spaces. Evans-Pritchard puts it well by saying that "myths do not, for us, explain rites; rather the rites explain the myths".<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Eliade, Rites and Symbols, 1958, xv.

<sup>94</sup> Jung 1959, 6.

<sup>95</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1965, 53



Colin Richards has embarked on a study of geological variation that will demonstrate the origin of the stones that were used to build circles in the Northern British Isles. His 2004 excavations in Orkney have shown that Vestra Field, Orkney, was used as a quarry for megaliths that were dragged long distances for use elsewhere, and based on his research he suggests that the stones at Stenness and Brodgar were brought by disparate groups from various locations on the Islands. In this scenario Richards suggests that the building process in which the circles were erected may be more significant than their later use.<sup>96</sup> This is certainly appropriate to Eliade's thinking:

*...nothing expresses the idea of creation, of making, building, constructing, than the cosmogony. The cosmogonic myth serves as the paradigm, the exemplary model, for every kind of making. Nothing better ensures the success of any creation (a village, a house, a child) than the fact of copying it after the greatest of all creations, the cosmogony.<sup>97</sup>*

Richards gives evidence for this from the beautiful hinged circle at Stenness, where although there is abundant evidence of feasting at the site, the circle was never completed. The act of making is the work that recreates the cosmogony on earth and wins the approval of the gods. This is useful when considering methodologies for using ideas about prehistoric spaces in the construction of contemporary structures in that what matters is the making of the space as much as what remains of that making.

To the contemporary artist this presents potential for building a methodology. In the post-modern world, no longer subscribing to Descartes' rational deism, nor to secular humanism, but inspired instead by the philosophy of Husserl, Heidegger, *et alia*, we are in a transition between the quantifiable finished work and an art of the senses in which the process of the artist is attended to instead. The Neo-Platonic revival found in

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<sup>96</sup> Richards 2004 OAT Website <http://www.orkneydigs.org.uk/dhl/PAPERS/cr/index.html>

<sup>97</sup> Eliade 1958, xii

the hermetic new age informs contemporary art, just as it informed the birth of archaeology in the seventeenth century. In this model for creative practice the act of making, as it is experienced, satisfies the artist. The artefacts that remain are not “finished works”, but exist as the remnants of the act of making.

### **The Artist as Shaman: A Near-death Experience, Beuys and Eliade**

I have referred to the shamanic practices of the Stone Age and so far evaded the subject of my own activities as contemporary shaman because of an urge to remain private about events in my own life that I seldom discuss with strangers. However, describing the Cabinet would be incomplete without explaining the role that certain shamanic practices have taken within the making of the work and the presentation of it to the public. In order to contextualise these practices I have drawn Joseph Beuys into the thesis as an example of another artist whose work I respect, not only as a creative practitioner, but as a person who observes and incorporates ancient principles into his work.

In 1997 I was in a spectacular car accident while driving on the Hollywood freeway; I was sideswiped by a Mr Jeong, who had left the freeway then re-entered, crossing the dividing lines and passing immediately in front of me. I hit his minivan, and my Jeep rolled over at 65 mph. As the car slid onto its top I remembered that if you draw a line from the front of the bonnet of a Jeep to the roll bar, the line passes through the driver's head, meaning that in a rollover the driver MUST lie down, or be killed. In the moment before the car went over onto its roof I grabbed the handle in the dashboard of the passenger side and lay across the seats. This doubtless saved my life, as the car rolled all the way over and landed on its remaining three wheels, the windshield crushed and

bonnet metal partially melted from the friction. I ended up cracking my head, and my leg was crushed beneath the steering wheel. In hospital later that night I was left sitting alone in a wheelchair in a bleak corridor, and remember slumping down thinking that I was about to die in this dreary place, having achieved little other than to make money and indulge myself. I vowed to make my creative practice from then on into a way of life that gave to others, with the focus on helping other people. I shortly thereafter began a new career as a University Professor, first teaching Painting, then Printmaking, Design, and Drawing. I have occasionally told this narrative to artist friends, and one painter suggested I read about the German artist Joseph Beuys.

There has been much debate over the truth of Beuys' experiences in the Crimea as a result of being shot down in flames by Russian fire in 1944 while serving in the Luftwaffe as the pilot of a JU-87 dive-bomber.

*Had it not been for the Tartars I would not be alive today. They were nomads of the Crimea, in what was then no-man's land between the Russian and German fronts, and they favoured neither side. I had already struck up a good relationship with them and often wandered off from the camp to spend time with them. "Do nix njemcky", they would say, "du Tatar", to persuade me to join their clan. Their nomadic ways attracted me, of course, although by that time their movements had been restricted. Yet it was they who discovered me in the snow after the crash, when the German search parties had already given up. I was still unconscious and I only regained consciousness completely after twelve days or so; by then I was back in a German Field Hospital. So the memories I have of that time are memories that penetrated my consciousness. The last thing I remember was it being too late to jump, too late for the parachute to open. That must have been a couple of seconds before hitting the ground. Luckily I was not strapped in – I always preferred being able to move freely, rather than buckling my safety belt. I had been punished for that, just as I had been punished for failing to carry a map of Russia – somehow I felt that I knew the area better than any map. My friend was strapped in and he disintegrated on impact – there was almost nothing left of him, But I must have been propelled through the windscreen as it flew off at the same speed as the plane hitting the ground, and that saved me, although I suffered serious skull and jaw injuries. Then I was completely*

*buried in the snow. That's how the Tartars found me a few days later. I remember voices saying "voda" (water), then the felt of their tents and the dense and pungent smell of cheese, grease and milk. They covered my body with grease to help it regenerate warmth and wrapped me in felt as an insulator to keep the warmth in.<sup>98</sup>*

Although Beuys' telling of the tale does not guarantee the veracity of his narrative, his story is entirely in keeping with the transformative initiation accounts offered by Shamans narrated by Eliade in his *Shamanism*.<sup>99</sup> Archaeologists and artists differ in their approach to artefacts and architecture. The processes of Joseph Beuys were his work of art: in his *actions* he presented his performance as the finished work, an almost shamanic methodology that seems to echo the findings of Mercia Eliade. Beuys, in many ways, fulfils Eliade's requirements, having ascended to the heavens in his Stuka, "died" in his crash, evoked and incarnated his disputed but mystical Tartar guide / rescuers while recovering, and made efforts to heal the spirit the post-war world by making his esoteric performances and works of art.

*Certainly the incidents of the war produced an after-effect on me; something else had to die. I believe this phase was important for me, in that I had to fully re-organize my fundamental constitution; for too long I had been hindered by my body. The initial stage was a state of total exhaustion that quickly became an orderly phase of renewal. Things in me had to be totally transplanted. A physical change had to take place in me.<sup>100</sup>*

This narrative is particularly interesting to me, as it gives me a personal route into understanding why I felt a deep connection to the process of making work that is not intended to be commercial. For the last six years my work has been made because I need to make it, not to fulfil my need for money. There is also a mystical element,

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<sup>98</sup> Durini, 20

<sup>99</sup> Eliade, 1974

<sup>100</sup> Durini, 24

particularly with the *Cabinet*, connecting the production of the work to the ancestors (the dead of Neolithic Britain) and communicating the intentions of the dead to the living. If Beuys had his plane crash, so I might have my car-crash. Following the accident I found myself in a radical state of re-organization, transforming my life from a freelance practice in commercial art production to an almost religious dedication to making art that helped people find their own creative journey.

Shamans are found worldwide fulfilling a role as the individual who mediates the spirit worlds with the human world. Eliade describes the essential features of shamanism as:

*Ascent to heaven, descent to the underworld to bring back the patient's soul or to escort the dead, evocation and incarnation of the 'spirits' in order to undertake the ecstatic journey, 'mastery over fire' and so on.*<sup>101</sup>

He notes that shamans are seldom the only religious representative, but have particular functions to fulfil as medicine men, magicians, or fakirs, and furthermore may have characteristics of psychopomps, priests, mystics or poets<sup>102</sup>. Other religious representatives co-exist with shamans, who are masters of ecstatic techniques but need not dominate the religious practices of the people.<sup>103</sup>

We know what one late Neolithic shaman might have looked like: in May of 1802 the Upton Lovell 2a bowl barrow was excavated by William Cunnington, who found it concealed the remains of a shaman or proto-druid (*Fig. 45*) buried with his flint axe heads, a whetstone, a hammer-stone, and a collection of odd pebbles. Five iron oxide

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<sup>101</sup> Eliade 1974, 376.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

nodules had been broken into cup shaped pieces, and thirty-six bone points had been attached along the hem of leather tunic. A row of perforated boar tusks was found near his knees, presumably from the edge of a coat. In 2000 Dr. Colin Shell examined microscopically the same tools, noting that some of the stones had been used for burnishing gold, suggesting that the shaman was also a metal worker.<sup>104</sup> Similar tusks were found in the graves of the Boscombe bowman and the Amesbury archer was found with both boar's tusks and a pillow stone used for working metal.



Figure 45. The Upton Lovell bones. Photo courtesy of Devises Museum.

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<sup>104</sup> Shell, 2000, 271.

Burl notes that this costume resembles that of Southern Siberian shamans, commenting on the unusual objects as “tantalizing wraiths of witchcraft practices”.<sup>105</sup> Present studies of shamanism suggest that this is a global phenomenon present in all ages, and there seems to be no reason to preclude the type from ancient Britain.

Although very late in the record, our closest source for understanding Neolithic shamanism may actually come from the Iron Age invasion of Britain by the Romans. Although there is no case for druids being the creators of monuments like Stonehenge, they seem to have an undeniable longevity that may offer clues into Neolithic religious practice.

Images of Bronze Age shamans include Anne Ross’ description of the chief druid of the King of Ireland clad in a bull’s skin and wearing a head dress of white feathers, and in another appearance wearing a coloured cloak and golden earrings.<sup>106</sup> Ross is critical of Roman and Victorian views of the druids as “noble savages” and believed that the druids were:

*“...little different from the priests / shamans of the entire barbarian and later pagan world, concerned with shape-shifting and primitive magic, controlling ritual and propitiating the treacherous gods with sacrifice”.*<sup>107</sup>

We know that there was a connection between the European druids and groves of trees, noted by Caesar as sacred *nemetons*, where crudely carved heads stood and sacrifices were made. It is worth once again noting the span of the timber circle tradition, from the early Neolithic to the Roman period in Britain; if these were in fact the

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<sup>105</sup> Burl 1996, 169.

<sup>106</sup> Ross, 1996, 83.

<sup>107</sup> Ross, *Ibid*, 86-87.

sacred *nemeton* spaces used by druids, they offer hints at longevity to the roots of the druidic order. Stuart Piggott suggests:

*"with the British parallels for henges and long enclosures and ritual shafts long before the Druids may we not have to reconsider that their doctrine was in fact of British origin?"*<sup>108</sup>

Aubrey Burl approves of the idea that the druids were the late development of religious practices that were ages old, citing Diodorus Siculus:

*"druids would foretell the future by stabbing a man in the stomach and then watching his writhings, a form of divination in which they have full confidence, as it is of old tradition".*<sup>109</sup>

Diogenes Laertes makes it clear that druidry was already an ancient institution by 200 BC.<sup>110</sup> Caesar notes their creation myth (alluding to Dispater, who Davidson compares to "the Germanic Woden"<sup>111</sup>) and their timekeeping methods:

*"All the Gauls assert that they are descended from the god Dis, and say that this tradition has been handed down by the Druids. For that reason they compute the divisions of every season, not by the number of days, but of nights; they keep birthdays and the beginnings of months and years in such an order that the day follows the night."*<sup>112</sup>

Of Druidry Caesar says:

*"This institution is supposed to have been devised in Britain, and to have been brought over from it into Gaul; and now those who desire to gain a more accurate knowledge of that system generally proceed thither for the purpose of studying it."*<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Piggott, 1965, 235.

<sup>109</sup> Siculus, I viii

<sup>110</sup> Diogenes Laertius, I i

<sup>111</sup> Davidson 1988, 209, 215.

<sup>112</sup> Caesar 6. XVIII.

<sup>113</sup> Caesar VI xiii



If we accept the descent of the central British Bronze Age inhabitants from the indigenous Pretani, discussed earlier in the exposition on Neolithic Britain, we might expect their shamans to be the religious inheritors of an ancient tradition with roots dating from the Neolithic.

Comparisons of shamans and artists have been discussed at length by a variety of authors<sup>114</sup>, who see artistic process as the ancestor of ancient shamanism. In this view shamans made rock art while in altered states of consciousness. This is an approach that is of particular interest given the support offered by discoveries of Neolithic psychedelic herbs at Balfarg, described elsewhere.

Joseph Beuys exemplifies the role of contemporary artist as shaman, filling many of the necessary criteria for taking on that role, with the exception that he does not appear to have consciously mediated the world of the dead for the living. I associate my practice with shamanism, as I have a conscious desire to communicate the creative values of our ancestors to the Millennial generations.

### **Entheogens, Archaeology and the Creative Process**

Using drugs may have re-enforced power structures in Antiquity by making already impressive spaces even more extraordinary. If initiates under the influence of mind-altering substances were entering spaces designed to enforce awe of elders and subservience to their belief system then their leaders were placed in a position of enormous psychological power over the community.

Organic remains seldom survive from the Neolithic, but there are enough examples found in the British Isles to offer some surprising results. Merryn Dinely's recent

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<sup>114</sup> Lommel, 1967. Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1996. Lewis Williams, 2002. Dissanayake, 1995.

research into Neolithic organic remains led her to the conclusion that the Megalith builders were accomplished brewers. A mash discovered at Ashgrove, Fife included pollens of immature Lime flowers (*Tilia cordata*) and Meadowsweet (*Filipendula vulgaris*), which Dinely convincingly suggests is indicative of Mead, a potent brew of fermented honey.<sup>115</sup> She deduces the remains of a porridge-like sludge on pottery found at Balfarg henge to be the remains of the processes of the simple brewing of ale, using large pots with flat lids like those found at Skara Brae and sealed perhaps with beeswax, traces of which were found in the mash.<sup>116</sup> More astonishing in the Balfarg pollen samples found in the sludge is the presence of Belladonna, a trance-inducing poisonous herb, and Henbane, an hallucinogenic and poisonous herb the seeds of which were found on a separate pottery sherd, evidently prepared as a narcotic<sup>117</sup>, suggesting that events at stone circles were wilder than we might imagine.

In an interesting parallel to this Britain-centred thesis that deals so much with artificial caves, very early Dionysian festivals appear to have been rooted in events including fire and intoxication by mead, which was the original Dionysian brew before he became forever associated with the grape and wine.<sup>118</sup>

The oldest recipe for mead is found in an ancient Greek text that tells us to mix 1/3 part of honey with 2/3 parts of water, then allow the mixture to stand for forty days during the hottest time of the year. After ten days the primitive brewer should leave it

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<sup>115</sup> Dinely & Dinely, 2000, 138

<sup>116</sup> Dinely & Dinely, 2000, 146

<sup>117</sup> Barclay, Gordon & Russell-White, Christopher 1993, 109

<sup>118</sup> Karenji, 1976, 36

open to the air to allow it to begin to ferment, then seal the container again for the remaining thirty days.<sup>119</sup> Home-brewing expert Leon Kania notes that:

*"honey lacks the acids and tannin important to fermentation and clarification, so augmentation with citrus and tea is recommended to increase the speed and efficiency of the brewing process."<sup>120</sup>*

According to Dinely, Meadowsweet provides the necessary acid, but further research is need to confirm the success of brewing with Henbane and Meadowsweet alone.

Henbane has been associated with beer for hundreds of years. Medieval German brewers used the plant, known as "Bilsen", to flavour and provide added intoxication, and the word became the origin of "Pilsen" in Pilsener beer.<sup>121</sup> Dale Pendell describes an experience of drinking Henbane beer that is very different to that of Schenk smoking the seeds, described later:

*Henbane beer has a lovely reddish colour. It's quite good if it's made by a skilled brewer. I don't remember any profound perceptual changes, except for hints of halos around the lights, sparkly and diffused. It was very pleasant and rather a talkative and social beverage.*

*If you drink too much everything will look reddish for two days.<sup>122</sup>*

Henbane is an hallucinogenic plant native to the Eastern hemisphere, ranging from India to Britain. It is very durable, surviving both bitter cold and hot sun.<sup>123</sup> There are

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<sup>119</sup> Karenyi, 1976. 37 – 38

<sup>120</sup> Kania, 2000, 41

<sup>121</sup> Nowadays, like other casualties of the two hundred year old "war on drugs" herbal additives to beers have become uncommon, although to my own knowledge and pleasure very good hemp beer is currently made on a small scale in Montreal, Canada and San Diego, California.

<sup>122</sup> Pendell, 2005, 254. However, Graham Dinely, Merry'n's brewer husband warned me in a personal email that "A few pints of are psychedelic/hallicinogenic from the alkaloids. More than a few pints (of Henbane Beer) is unfortunately lethal and even more unfortunately it becomes very "moreish" the more it is drunk. It is quite important to prevent people from drinking themselves to death with henbane beer, unless that is the specific intention."

more than fourteen varieties, the most commonly used in medicine being the Black Henbane, *Hyoscyamus Niger*, which was found at Balfarg, containing the tropane alkaloids hyoscyamine, atropine and the hallucinogenic scopolamine.<sup>124</sup> The usual effect of Henbane is to induce narcotic sleep, but Rudgley (a leading expert in the field of entheogen research) describes an interesting variety of symptoms, including:

*Visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile hallucinations (whether awake or asleep whilst under its influence), temporary loss of memory (users report difficulty in recalling the experience of intoxication in any detail), distortions of vision and hearing, profuse sweating and physical discomfort, sometimes involving the sensation that the body is breaking up or dissolving, intense pressure in the head, macroscopia (i.e. seeing objects as larger than they actually are), constant desire to move, lack of consciousness to the external world and sensations of flight.*<sup>125</sup>

Pendell, who has survived sampling a multitude of plant alkaloids, treats Henbane with some caution, noting that it is known for causing schizoid behaviour. There are very few first-hand accounts of the experience of using the herb as an hallucinogen. Here the narrator is the intrepid Gustav Schenk, who wrote his out-of-print (and hard to find) *The Book of Poisons* in 1956, detailing his own experiences of several dangerous substances, including henbane, of which he inhaled the smoke of burning seeds:

*My teeth were clenched, and a dizzy rage took possession of me. I know that I trembled with horror; but I also know that I was permeated by a peculiar sense of well-being connected with the crazy sensation that my feet were growing lighter, expanding and breaking loose from my body. Each part of my body seemed to be going off on its own. My head was growing independently larger, and I was seized by the fear that I was falling apart. At the same time I experienced an intoxicating sensation of flying. The frightening certainty that my end was near through the dissolution of my body was counterbalanced by an animal joy in flight. I soared where my hallucinations – the clouds, the lowering sky, herds of beasts, falling leaves which were quite unlike ordinary leaves, billowing*

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<sup>123</sup> Hutchens 1973. 151.

<sup>124</sup> Rudgley, 1998. 127.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* 127-128.

*streamers of steam and rivers of molten metal – were swirling along. All this time I was not sleeping peacefully with limbs relaxed, but in motion. The urge to move, although the capacity for movement is greatly curtailed, is the essential characteristic of Hyoscyamus intoxication.*<sup>126</sup>

Significant to the present work is the method of ingestion used by Schenk to experience the effects of henbane intoxication: the psychedelic explorer charred the seeds of the plant on a flat hotplate which he heated with an alcohol lamp in order to produce smoke that contained the intoxicating alkaloids present in the plant.<sup>127</sup> The organic remains on the sherd from pot number 63 at Balfarg which carried the henbane seed cache is described in Long, Tipping *et alia* as a preparation of “a thick consistency (that) was not thoroughly stirred”<sup>128</sup> that had been charred on the sherd after it had been broken. Moreover: “Boiling of flowers and leaves together would be consistent with pollen occurring in a carbohydrate rich gruel, resulting from the breakdown of the mucilage rich leaves of henbane”.<sup>129</sup> The deposits of the gruel were found on the inside and outside of the three sherds recorded from pot number 63 and interpreted as the remains of material that had boiled over. If it was the intention of the users of the broken pots deposited at Balfarg to heat a gruel of henbane plant in order to produce smoke, instead it may be that we are seeing the evidence of a method of intoxication by using previously broken sherds as crude griddles to hold mashed herbal gruel as it was charred by the heat of charcoal or peat. We know that lamps were made and used in the period, and a few potential incense burning plates have been found, notably within

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<sup>126</sup> Schenk 1955. 48.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>128</sup> Long, Tipping, Holden, Bunting & Milburn 2000, 52.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

one of the Aubrey holes at Stonehenge, where a lamp / burner was found with greasy matter inside it.<sup>130</sup>

The suggestion that the Balfarg Henbane may be used as persuasive evidence for drug use has been criticized in *The Use of Henbane as a Hallucinogen at Neolithic Ritual Sites: a Re-evaluation*<sup>131</sup>. That paper attempts to make a reinvestigation of the evidence discovered at Balfarg, and has been taken as refutation of the evidence, however, the authors' research indicated that their *duplication* of the discovery of henbane seeds on the potsherds found at Balfarg was not possible; the authors are emphatic that hallucinogens may have been used at Neolithic sacred spaces, but their study of pollen remains at Balfarg does not provide additional scientific evidence for such use.

Aaron Watson has suggested that closing the door of Maes Howe when a fire was burning within would decrease air circulation and induce altered states of consciousness in participants in events within,<sup>132</sup> but there is no evidence of fire reported at Maes Howe. It seems more likely that the door was closed in order to enhance the use of the smoke of herbs as incense held in a bowl, or for the containment of the vapour of herbs that caused hallucinations or altered states of consciousness, which would have left minimal traces, such as charcoal deposits like those found in the eight Orcadian structures referred to earlier in the section on fire and charcoal.

It is indeed tempting to conclude that the Balfarg plant was used for ritual shamanic visitations to the other world in order to know the will of the ancestors, or the animal

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<sup>130</sup> Burl 1989, 100.

<sup>131</sup> Long, Tipping, Holden, Bunting & Milburn 2000.

<sup>132</sup> Watson, 2001.

spirits, or God. It has been used for centuries in herbal medicine as a powerful narcotic, so potent that it has been recommended as a substitute for heroin. Among the many thousands of herbal medicines, useful and potent herbal anaesthetics include Mandragora, and Datura.<sup>133</sup> It is entirely plausible that the henbane preparation was made for purely medicinal purposes.

Belladonna is well known as one of the witches “flying herbs” used by attendees of sixteenth century sabbats; it contains the same alkaloids as Henbane, and has similar effects. Schenk describes the effects:

*The first action of the poison is to render the victim very cheerful and lively. His ideas tumble over one another; he becomes extremely talkative and experiences a strong urge to movement. These symptoms increase to unrestrained gaiety. The patient laughs and dances. At the climax of his mood of exhilaration, his excitement grows more intense. He is no longer master of his own senses which deceive him. He sees non-existent figures and movements which no-one makes. He hears music and sounds when there is complete silence all around him. The colours of objects before his eyes change: green becomes black, and a black surface appears to him a dazzling light. His confusion grows greater and greater and in this phase he may be easily subordinated to another's will, for he is completely open to influence and will do whatever he is told. If he has swallowed a great deal of the poison, this state of confusion and sensory derangement leads up to a temporary but acute mental disorder exactly resembling a symptomatic psychosis. Sudden outbursts of delirium and increasingly intense periods of mania create a terrifying and uncanny clinical picture, which finally ends in convulsions similar to those of epilepsy.<sup>134</sup>*

It is incorrect to assume that these plants are totally lethal. In fact Schenk and other toxicologists point out that Belladonna and Henbane poisoning frequently kill children, but seldom adults, although large quantities of Belladonna berries will indeed lead to

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<sup>133</sup> Schenk 1955. 238.

<sup>134</sup> Schenk 1955, 36.

death.<sup>135</sup> Belladonna cigarettes were once sold over the counter in the USA: but because of an abundance of abuse by youthful experimenters eating the cigarettes instead of smoking them, by the 1970's the authorities made illegal such easy access.<sup>136</sup>

Although drug use is generally illegal in the Western world their prohibition has not prevented the use of drugs by artists in their creative processes, a practice noted by the editors<sup>137</sup> and curators of *Ecstasy*<sup>138</sup>.

With the exception of alcohol, which helps to "take the edge off" self-censorship when making paintings and sculpture I have experimented with wormwood (absinthe) and kava kava, both of which made me less creative. When I used marijuana and LSD in the 1980's I found it impossible to make good work while under the influence of these drugs, but I am certain that my work has indeed been powerfully influenced particularly by a variety of experiences during LSD trips. I welcome people in altered states of consciousness to enjoy my work as it continues to be influenced by my understanding of the world as a place half experienced within our everyday reality. Although at present I am uninterested in taking drugs, I am very concerned to find and use other altered states of reality in my practice. I pay close attention to my dreams, and use them in making my art. I believe that our dreams can tell us the truth about our everyday lives. The communication with the spirit world found in the trance state of narcotic intoxication can also be found in yogic meditation. I practice yoga every morning, using the stretching and breathing exercises to improve my ability to observe my imagination and

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 37-38, Andrews, 20-21

<sup>136</sup> Pendell, 2005, 260.

<sup>137</sup> Schimmell and Mark 2005,

<sup>138</sup> The exhibit was held at MOCA Los Angeles from October 9<sup>th</sup> 2005 – February 20<sup>th</sup> 2006.



clarify my purpose throughout the day. I want to look into the abyss of the subconscious, but I have no wish to fall into it.

I think the most important lesson to learn from drug use within sacred spaces is that the circles and artificial caves appear to be places to contain unusual behaviour. Using similar geomantic approaches when displaying the Cabinet lead to a sense of containment and safety for visitors.

### **Rites of Passage, Rites of Making**

If my work is inspired by shamanic practice, how do I use the practices of ancient mystics in the process of making art? The ubiquitous anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the term '*rites de passage*' in 1909 to describe certain types of customary cultural events, which focus on the individual's progress through life.<sup>139</sup> Victor Turner enlarges upon Van Gennep's consideration of rites of passage, by noting an additional two type of ritual events that mark the seasonal changes of the environment:

*Rites that accompany the passage of a person from one social status to another in the course of his or her life, and  
Rites that mark recognized points in the passage of time (new year, new moon, solstice, or equinox).*

*Contemporary rites de passage in the modern sense, are those that accompany birth, the attainment of adult status, marriage, and death.*<sup>140</sup>

When a space is reserved for liminal<sup>141</sup> purposes there is a structural implication that there are those able to enter the space to participate, and those who remain outside - a

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<sup>139</sup> Van Gennep 1960.

<sup>140</sup> Turner 2003, 1.

<sup>141</sup> Turner describes rites of passage as those in which an individual crosses a threshold (L. *Limina*) from one state of being to another.

separation of the initiated from the laity. Visitors to the *Cabinet* are initiated into my view of contemporary art as the vehicle of ancient practices.

There are obvious problems attached to the use of comparisons of the practices of differing cultures in attempts to make sense of ritual monuments in a remote Northern archipelago, but underlying generic structures of ritual offered by Eliade's studies of comparative religion may be helpful in interpreting chambered mounds in a broader context. Eliade wrote several seminal works about religious practice, now widely regarded as classics in the field of the History of Religion. As a historian, particularly concerned with the underlying structures of religious behaviour, he compared traditional practices from all over the world in order to come to his conclusions about ritual practice. Eliade is not without his critics:

*As influential as Eliade was as a scholar of myth and religion, he has remained extremely controversial. Indeed, many scholars, especially those in social sciences, have completely ignored or vigorously attacked Eliade's scholarship on myth and religion as methodologically uncritical, subjective, and unscientific. Critics charge that Eliade is guilty of uncritical universal generalisations; reads all sorts of 'profound' mythic and religious meanings into his data; ignored rigorous scholarly procedures of verification; and interjects all sorts of unjustified, personal, metaphysical, and ontological assumptions and judgements into his scholarship.<sup>142</sup>*

In addition, he has been properly criticised for an interest in right wing political movements in Romania, (while these accusations are distasteful, they appear to have little significance to the validity of the findings of his written work). I am not impressed with critical views of Eliade's work that ignore the fundamental analysis that he offers: while his descriptions of Aboriginal myth may indeed be subjectively interpreted, the observations that lead him to describe general structures of ritual behaviour seem

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<sup>142</sup> Allen 1998, xi, cited by Trubshaw, 2002,

indisputable, being based on innumerable examples gathered from as many cultures. Eliade is indeed “guilty” of universal generalisations, stating that it is his intention to create such generalisations in order to provide a framework for the study of the rituals in the context of the history of religions<sup>143</sup>.

Following Van Gennep Eliade was specifically interested in three kinds of initiatory rites: puberty rites, rites of shamanic initiation and the rites performed when a candidate joins a secret society. It is my contention that chambered cairns may have been used to segregate initiates from the rest of the community for *rites de passage* as observed by Eliade, who summarizes the most common of rites of tribal initiations thus:

*Period of seclusion in the bush (symbol of the beyond) and larval existence, like that of the dead; prohibitions imposed on the candidates by the fact that they are assimilated to the dead (a dead man cannot eat certain dishes, or cannot use his fingers, etc);  
Face and body daubed with ashes or certain calcareous substances, to obtain the pallid hue of ghosts; funerary masks;  
Symbolic burial in the temple or fetish house;  
Symbolic descent to the underworld;  
Hypnotic sleep; drinks that make the candidate unconscious;  
Difficult ordeals: beatings, feet held close to a fire, suspension in the air, amputation of fingers, and various other cruelties.*

*All these rituals and ordeals are designed to make the candidate forget his past life... during their stay in the bush the rest of the community considers the candidates dead and buried, or devoured by a monster or a god, and upon their return to the village regards them as ghosts.<sup>144</sup>*

Later in his life he added to his note of the “period of seclusion in the bush... like that of the dead” saying:

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<sup>143</sup> Eg: Eliade 1958, 2: “Generally speaking, the history of religion distinguishes three categories or types of initiations.”

<sup>144</sup> Eliade 1964, 64.

*"In the majority of traditional societies, initiatory rites at puberty essentially involve a ceremony of symbolic death and rebirth for the initiate. The "death" is signified by tortures and initiatory mutilations, or by a ritual internment... also by isolation in the bush or in a solitary hut, which is to say, segregation in Shadows."<sup>145</sup>*

Chambered cairns are described conventionally as burial mounds, and indeed, human bones are found inside most of them, typically accompanied by grave goods like beakers, food and animal bones, and mace heads. But there are serious problems with the view that they were ONLY burial mounds. The mounds were typically built with low-roofed passageways leading to a chambered space. In Orkney, the majority had open doorways, so access to their interior was uncomfortable, but not denied. Although most of the cairns had been backfilled, and the entrances carefully disguised it is clear from the masonry that the doorways were intentionally built for use, and entrances were open during the use of the mound.<sup>146</sup>

*"Segregation in the shadows... in a solitary hut"* is a description that can be easily applied to Orkadian cairns, where even now the mounds are isolated; as entrances to the underworld the low and narrow openings of chambered cairns (particularly the Maes Howe type) work very effectively. Creeping in darkness through the muddy passage offers modern visitors a suggestive and claustrophobic journey beneath the ground with flickering flashlight beams partially illuminating the way, and enhances the contrasting experience of reaching the improbably high chambers within.

Eliade's summary may be helpful if we apply it to the archaeology of chambered cairns. Aspects of his framework that appear to have particular relevance to chambered cairns include the symbolic burial of candidates in the temple or fetish house, with an

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<sup>145</sup> Eliade, 1985, 7.

<sup>146</sup> Davidson & Henshall, 36.

accompanying symbolic descent to the underworld; the artificial introduction of hypnotic sleep using drugs that make the candidate unconscious; difficult ordeals: beatings, feet held close to a fire. Evidence of the debris of these elements is present when we view chambered mounds as places for initiatory practice.

The Maes Howe passage-blocking stone is designed to be rocked closed *from inside* the low corridor, implying exactly this kind of use of such spaces by the living, although profoundly in association with their ancestors, whose bones appear to have been deposited and removed periodically from the chambers. The audience in these cases is the group who enter to participate as the ritual is performed with them by the initiated so that, having entered liminal space between light and dark, life and death, they may return to become one with the mature community. Here there is a relationship between three groups: the initiated and the applicants, both admitted to the sacred place, and the remaining community, which is kept at a distance from the ritual by earthworks and stone as rites of passage take place within the sacred enclosure.

### **Creating Ritual Spaces as Safe Places for Unusual Behaviour**

There is a clear distinction between Neolithic artificial caves and the later stone circles. Tunnels with blocking stones and internal chambers imply a highly private and secretive ritual, while the enormous stone circles appear to define a more open, yet distinctly controlled outdoor space. But the ditches at Brodgar, Stenness and Avebury were formidable barriers to intruders, not particularly as defensive works but very effective as limitations of sacred space. Burl says that the ditches at Avebury were easily deep enough to kill any animal or person who had the misfortune to tumble into

them; they stood originally at ten metres (thirty feet) deep, beneath the embankment that added an additional six metres (eighteen feet) of height, for a formidable sixteen metres (forty-eight feet) total from top to bottom.<sup>147</sup> Note that this enormous ditch is on the *inside* of the mound. If these were defensive earth-workings the ditch would be on the *outside* of the ring of earthworks, allowing for the firing of missiles at an enemy trapped in the ditch. The henge monuments allow people to climb the outside palisade, but don't allow entry to the space unless using the entrance causeways. Outsiders are able to observe from a distance but not to participate in events taking place within the enclosure. There are problems with this idea - if the embankments were built as an auditorium, they are remarkably poor structures for the purpose – but if the focus of the builders was on the space as it functioned, not the space as it worked for entertainment then this adds weight to the nature of the enclosure as sacred space. Colin Richards' theory based on his observations in Orkney that the act of building itself was culturally significant finds support from Aubrey Burl, who suggests that the construction of the Avebury henge was carried out by separate groups in the pursuit or fulfilment of the obligations of social status. Burl believes that such a process of construction explains the eccentric layout of most earthwork structures remaining from the Neolithic period, with each social group being committed to completing their section of the earthwork. This is an attractive theory, given the broad inconsistency of the geometry and diversity of structure at Avebury.<sup>148</sup> Technically, places like Newgrange and Knowth continue to impress, even with our jaded and commodity-oriented taste for huge structures. The megaliths of Stonehenge and Avebury continue to amaze visitors when they see them

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<sup>147</sup> Burl 1979, 176.

<sup>148</sup> Burl 1979, 171.

for the first time and consider the incredible cost of labour that was put into erecting them. It's important here to consider the scale of places like the Stenness complex, or Callanish, or Newgrange – in comparison to the domestic dwellings of contemporary people these were enormous – the amount of work involved in building them is often estimated and referred to by contemporary writers as a method of inspiring a cynical post-modern audience to look on them with awe.

The construction of earth enclosures may be interpreted as a method of manipulating space to keep unwanted outsiders out and keeping select insiders in, but without a bellicose intention. Eliade draws attention to the regular consecration of city walls in the Middle Ages and comments that the walls began as magical defences, explaining that defending a place against physical attack is similar to defence against magical attack; the result of a failure to defend against either kind of aggression is the collapse of “our world”.<sup>149</sup> Walls around spaces need not be purely martial in their origin when there is a relationship between the symbolic effect of enclosure that gives definition to territory or power, and the practical needs of segregation.<sup>150</sup> Avebury's high earthen palisades provide an artificial horizon from the inside, which creates a unique confined space within which there is little distraction from the rest of the world (and perhaps could help with astronomical observation by providing a relatively level artificial horizon) while restricting unwanted observation from outside.

In Orkadian chambered cairns the low entrance passageways imposed a postural inferiority on those entering the chamber, who would have crawled on hands and knees between the stone-roofed and narrow-spaced orthostats to reach their goal of the

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<sup>149</sup> Eliade 1959, 49.

<sup>150</sup> Pearson & Richards, 1994, 24.

central chambers, while those who had already entered would be standing, ready to receive the newcomer into their company. At Maes Howe, where the passage is aligned to midwinter solstice sunrise, the narrow passageway was built with a large stone at the entrance that appears to have been used to block the entrance to the mound. The arrangement at Newgrange is similar; there may have been a passage-blocking door-stone. It is tempting to imagine the events at night. Perhaps there was a ceremony outside as frightened young people entered the dark tunnel, an ancient people fearfully crawling into the dark structure as they passed beneath the immense suspended ceiling boulders, entering the corbel vaulted chamber in pitch darkness (there is no reported evidence of carbon deposited on the roof of Newgrange) surrounded by the bones of their ancestors, perhaps sealing the passageway and waiting through the night gathered about the stone bowl in the chamber, following who knows what ancient prescriptions, until the moment that the solstice beam of sunlight penetrated the light-box and illuminated the mysterious spirals and solar symbols carved into the rocks; presumably observed and overseen by those who perhaps had already passed through this rite teaching the initiates; and in the morning a festive celebration that midwinter season had arrived, with the inevitable and promised arrival of a new annual cycle to come.

At Maes Howe, and many other spectacular Neolithic monuments, the circular ditch and earthwork around the central mound serve to physically separate the performers from the community, suggesting a division of the community into groups of initiated and uninitiated. The political function suggested by the inter-connection of structures over the landscape appears to lend support to this theory, implying that there was a gradually



developed hierarchal control over the locale, a leadership governing both belief-systems and land over large periods of time. These structures were not the simple burial chambers or circles of peaceful groups of happy Neolithic socialists<sup>151</sup>. The structures reflect an outlook that used spectacle and scale to awe impressionable people who were allowed access as initiates entering a social hierarchy. The people who controlled these initiations controlled the landscapes and were perhaps able to predict the changes of the season with some accuracy, providing structure to an otherwise chaotic life. Applying this to my work is challenging, because my work is to be shared, but simultaneously, initiations must be isolated experiences. Limiting the number of participants to a small group seems likely to be an effective way to create a private initiatory experience within a small gallery space. The performance becomes more important than the display; the objects are the artefacts of the creative process, which is where the focus of attention should truly be placed.

### **Auspicious Days for Making**

Are certain days better for making art? Although it is risky to draw too much from a Golden Dawn style of anthropological extension of traditional customs, traces of prehistoric seasonal celebrations appear to have remained in the folk beliefs of the indigenous population centuries after Christian mission had converted the people to the

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<sup>151</sup> A recent article in *The Scotsman* (Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2006) presented an interview with Dr. Rick Shulting of Queen's University, Belfast, in which he described the results of his research into Neolithic skulls from the South of England. 350 skulls were investigated, and healed depressed fractures found on 4 – 5% of them, with 2% unhealed, suggesting that the fracture was the cause of death. Most of the fatal blows were on the left side of the head, consistent with fighting among predominantly right-handed people. The report begins with the alarming statistic that "Britons living 5,000 to 6,000 years ago had one in fourteen chance of being bashed on the head and seriously injured or killed." Actually, the statistic should reflect the low number of people who actually were placed into chambered mounds. Burl suggests that the damage is as a result of the need to free the spirit of the deceased from the skull.

new faith. In his collection of Irish folklore W.B. Yeats said that traditionally the fairy folk of Ireland celebrated three major festivals in the year: May Eve, Midsummer Eve, and November Eve, giving these descriptions of the events:

*On May Eve, every seventh year they fight all round, but mostly on the "Plain-a-Bawn (wherever that is), for the harvest, for the best ears of corn belong to them...*

*On Midsummer Eve, when the bonfires are lighted in honour of St. John, the fairies are at their gayest, and sometimes steal away beautiful mortals to be their brides.*

*On November Eve they are at their gloomiest, for according to the old Gaelic reckoning, this is the first night of winter. This night they dance with ghosts, and the pooka is abroad, and witches make their spells, and girls set out a table with food in the name of the devil, that the fetch of their future lover may come through the window and eat of the food. After November Eve the blackberries are no longer wholesome, for the pooka has spoiled them.<sup>152</sup>*

Because the seasonal festivals are a physical reality, it is reasonable to think that sky-watching people would know and use the markers of solar and lunar events in order to help in planning the agricultural year.

The Quarter and Cross-Quarter days of the year, and their Neo-pagan Festival names are:

Samhain	November 1 <sup>st</sup>
Winter Solstice	December 21 <sup>st</sup>
Imbolc	February 1 <sup>st</sup>
Vernal Equinox	March 21 <sup>st</sup>
Beltain	May 1 <sup>st</sup>
Summer Solstice	July 21 <sup>st</sup>
Lughnasad (Lammas)	August 1 <sup>st</sup>
Autumnal Equinox	September 21 <sup>st</sup>

Ronald Hutton tracks the origins of folk traditions in Britain in his *Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*, and is convincing in his proposal that although many

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<sup>152</sup> Yeats, 1983. 12.

supposedly ancient traditions actually have relatively recent origins, the fire festivals of Beltain and Imbolc are deeply rooted in pre-history. There is little evidence to support the neo-pagan conviction that *all* these festivals were celebrated by Neolithic ancestors except Imbolc, which appears to have genuinely ancient festive roots, and the festival has origins that can be traced in Ireland through St. Bridget, who seems to have been a pre-Christian goddess adopted by early Irish missionaries in their efforts to subvert earlier druidic beliefs.<sup>153</sup> And according to Hutton's research the Beltain (Mayday) fire festival appears to be both ancient and pan-British, appearing in Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.<sup>154</sup> Anne Ross comments that Beltain was doubtless presided over by Druids, and may be associated with the Belenus, one of the more prevalent and ancient pastoral gods.<sup>155</sup> Hutton cites ancient Irish sources that seem to point to a similar event throughout Britain<sup>156</sup> in which farmers would light adjacent bonfires and drive their cattle between them. People also used the fires by jumping through them, in order to bring luck to their enterprises, or safety in their adventures. Events at Imbolc, which was converted to Candlemas by Roman Christians in the first Century, are considerably more obscure, having linguistic roots that suggest connections to sheep's milk and purification.<sup>157</sup> The Irish Christian evolution of the festival into Brigit's Eve may suggest that a pagan goddess of fire was associated with it, and the ancient roots of these two festivals seem to be unchallenged.

February 1<sup>st</sup> (Imbolc) and May 1<sup>st</sup> (Beltain) are noted in my calendar as particularly good days for making work.

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<sup>153</sup> Hutton, 1991, 153.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 176 – 183.

<sup>155</sup> Ross, 82.

<sup>156</sup> e.g. the Leabhar Gabhala and the Ulster Tain.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

## **Placing my Work in a Contemporary Context: Methodologies of Contemporary Artists Interpreting Neolithic British Art and Architecture**

In this section I identify three methods that I recognized as available to contemporary artists approaching the art and architecture of British Prehistory: *Reconstruction*, *“Artefacting”* and *Response*. When I prepared the materials for the show I became very concerned with how the work was to be shown or experienced by visitors and wanted to understand why I was unsatisfied by the conventional wall-hanging approach to the gallery used by many curators. I wanted the Cabinet to be an experienced event based on some of the ideas expressed in Eliade that I have come to think applied to the chambered earthworks.

Somewhat surprisingly, two of the methods described here are highly dependent upon their origins in antiquarianism while the third is more spontaneously creative, but deeply rooted in the acts of prehistoric peoples. These three methodologies are summarized then personal creative work described in detail that has been made to fulfil the criteria of each. The products of *Reconstruction* methodologies are usually found in museums; those of *Artefacting* methodologies are typically found in art galleries as *ready-mades*, or within the context of educational archaeological displays, while the results of *Responsive* methodologies are often within the territory of fine arts practitioners who frequently work in landscape and may also be found in art galleries.

## **Methodologies for Contemporary Artists Interpreting Neolithic British Art and Architecture: Reconstruction**

The most prosaic but simultaneously deceptive methodology is to attempt to reconstruct the past imitatively using deduction and intelligent guesswork. This approach uses archaeological illustration, installation, and re-enactment to recreate an imagined world that is firmly based on visits to authentic prehistoric British sites and studying a plethora of archaeological texts. Such interpretations are inevitably wrong because we must base this work upon so much uncertainty, but remain useful because they offer an image of the past based on contemporary ideas for a general audience who may not be specialists in the field. In the terms of the enlightenment, they are created in pursuit of the truthful reproduction of the past for the edification of the people. The search for truth is what prevents us from giving up the archaeological enterprise in existential despair, although it does seem a modernist approach. If we are post-historical, as Fukuyama has proclaimed, do we need to use any longer an outmoded modernist model in our attempts to present the past? While this may raise the worry that we are abandoning the rationalism of the modern project, should I not be perfectly content to make creative responses to the Neolithic, and hope that the work has something of the intention of the ritual structures upon which they are based?

## **Methodologies for Contemporary Artists Interpreting Neolithic British Art and Architecture: Reconstruction: Illustration**

The illustrative approach is a total dead-end as far as my creative practice goes. Archaeologists go to great lengths to establish their ideas, other scholars inevitably

criticize any new theory, and the ensuing discourse alters the preliminary stance, rendering particular points of view redundant. Illustrative reconstructions “age extremely quickly as the discourse develops, leaving them redundant. In an early modern example of this, Inigo Jones 1655 published his account “Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain Vulgarty Called Stone Henge on Salisbury Plain” including his own renderings of the monument in what he thought was its original form. They are beautifully drawn and very convincing architectural drawings, but they are completely fanciful and designed simply to defend Jones' theories of Stonehenge as a classical temple; as a pedagogical tool today they serve only as an illustration of fanciful ineptitude.

### **Methodologies for Contemporary Artists Interpreting Neolithic British Art and Architecture: Reconstruction: Installation**

Notwithstanding the efforts of neo-pagan megalithic circle builders, reconstructive methods are of least interest to fine artists, allowing little room for manoeuvre outside the information uncovered during research; the imitation of stone circles and artificial caves belonging instead to craftsmen involved in the fabrication of museum exhibits. No attempt has been made in my work to make an installation or re-enactment recreating Neolithic art or architecture, while the responsive and “artefacting” methodologies described here are of far more interest to this writer. An installation approach can be found in examples like the display at the Brú na Bóinne Visitors Centre in the Boyne Valley close to Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, where an attempt has been made to show visitors what the lives of the builders of these spectacular structures may have

been like. The centre has displayed a full size replica of the chamber of Newgrange, presumably to persuade visitors to stay away from the actual site itself.

In nineteenth Century England a rash of folly-building followed the interest in British antiquity sparked by antiquarians like William Stukeley and John Aubrey, the former thankfully a very good archaeologist who documented the Avebury stones even as they were being destroyed by depraved farmers, the latter more eccentric in his pursuits, which included becoming chief druid.



Figure 46. The Druid's Temple at Ilton, Yorkshire. Photo by Mike Jarvis

Many Edwardian follies were deeply imitative of megalithic structure, in some cases re-using the stones of ruined passage mounds or circles to create fanciful

“reconstructions” (e.g. Fig. 46). Nor has this kind of dubious reconstruction work disappeared, for contemporary artists continue to work in very similar territory, notably Eddie Heath in Montreal, Canada, and Rob Roy in New York State, USA. Their works have much in common with museum installations that attempt to reconstruct and illustrate the past.

Both Eddie Heath and Rob Roy build contemporary megalithic structures based on ancient models, to greater or lesser degrees of success. Heath’s works are imitative but incomplete – his replica passage mound has no chamber or passage behind its West Kennett inspired façade, instead simply offering a decorative addition to the retaining embankment of a large pond in his wealthy client’s garden.



Figure 47. Eddie Heath’s West Kennett styled Façade. Photo by the Author.

Rob Roy’s works are subtly different to the decorative elements of neo-Victorian Eddie Heath. Roy creates megalithic circles for the practice of neo-pagan ritual (Fig. 48). These are megalithic structure that are not efforts to directly imitate the ancient



monuments, but that idealise them and recreate them as they could have been, seen through the romantic idealist view of a new age leader.



Figure 48. Rob Roy's Earthwood Circle. Photo courtesy of Earthwood Building School

The circles superficially resemble megalithic structures, but would not be mistaken for the real thing because of anomalies like the altar-stone outside the circle that suit Gardnerian Wicca better than Neolithic religion.

Reconstruction Installations may be created for their pedagogical value. In Figure 49 we see a wood circle at Knowth, recreating what archaeologists think the timber circle would have looked like in prehistoric Ireland. While this is a brave attempt to objectively recreate the past, there are problems with it, as uninformed visitors may think this is a truthful representation instead of an effort to show only what we do know, leaving out anything that might have been. This particular piece is indeed responsibly made, in that we know an extraordinary amount of detail about the position, size and even deposits

found beneath the wooden posts thanks to the detailed report of excavations by George Eogan at Knowth since 1962.<sup>158</sup>



Figure 49. Reconstructed wood circle at Knowth. Photo by Ken Williams.

We lack, however, enough information to be able to accurately reconstruct anything at all above ground, as any carving or colour that once adorned the posts has rotted away long ago, as has any roof, wattle, cloth, or indeed any kind of organic decoration that once may have graced the structure. We are not certain of the height of the posts, although it may be statistically likely that they were as high as this reconstruction shows, certainty is elusive.

Illustrative and Installation Reconstructions inevitably fail because they cannot change with prevailing archaeological theory, which is fluid and constantly shifting in emphasis.

Because of these problems I find the methodology unattractive.

Re-enactment shares many of the same problems of reconstruction. A contemporary person cannot possibly live the life of a Neolithic Briton, and can only act the role, with

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<sup>158</sup> The responsible reconstruction of this wood circle is impressive. See Eogan & Roche, 1997, 101 – 196 for a detailed report of the post holes.

all the issues of interpretation that come with any performance. This subject is worth a book in itself, and in the interests of space I cannot dwell for any length upon it here except to note that there are re-enactments at various locations in the British Isles that attempt to show Neolithic life.

### **Methodologies for Contemporary Artists Interpreting Neolithic British Art and Architecture: “Artefacting” Methodology**

This chapter deals with the roots of the practice of displaying artefacts in special buildings that are open to the public and then describes the work of several artists who have used an *artefacting* methodology in their work. While not specifically Neolithic in orientation, problems pertaining to the display of Neolithic discoveries fits within this area. The approach is largely analogous to the display of archaeological finds as museum objects: a broken bowl is a mundane object until it acquires three thousand years of history and is displayed in a museum showcase, when it becomes an high status object of fascination subject to the vagaries of market value.

### **Methodologies for Contemporary Artists Interpreting Neolithic British Art and Architecture: “Artefacting” Methodology: Cabinets of Curiosity and the Museum Culture**

The issue of display is a serious question encountered in my contemporary creative process using Neolithic art and architecture as a model. The concept of art simply did not exist in the Neolithic in the way we think of it now. If the process of making is the heart of art in my practice, how do I display the work with any sense of authenticity and integrity to the purpose of making the work with a Neolithic mindset? Here I will look at

the way display has changed over the last few hundred years, noting in particular the display of ancient objects, their contexts and roles as objects of entertainment and pedagogy.

Collections are at the heart of all museums: humans seem to have an instinct to collect objects. The earliest historically recorded collector was the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC Babylonian King Nabonidus, who had a collection of antiquities dating back to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century BC<sup>159</sup>. In the early renaissance antiquarians began gathering artefacts, with their inspiration coming from the relic collections of medieval ecclesiastical foundations. The mysterious aura of supernatural intercession inherent to miracle-working relics was passed on to these collections, which quickly became places for enlightened pilgrimage; a secretive sense of occult practice hanging about them<sup>160</sup>. Antiquarian practices of classification and their emphasis upon the interconnection of the natural world embodied an approach to the universe that recognized the fundamental hermetic principle "as above, so below"<sup>161</sup>: cabinets were a search for meaning, collections

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<sup>159</sup> Museums, History of. (2006). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved January 12, 2006, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-76503> We might refer to Noah's Ark as a collection of Natural History, as Peale did.

<sup>160</sup> A situation used to fullest extent by Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*.

<sup>161</sup> The Emerald Table of Hermes Trismegistus, here in full from Steele, Robert & Singer, Dorothy. 1928 Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine xxi p.42.

"0) When I entered into the cave, I received the tablet zaradi, which was inscribed, from between the hands of Hermes, in which I discovered these words:

- 1) True, without falsehood, certain, most certain.
- 2) What is above is like what is below, and what is below is like that which is above. To make the miracle of the one thing.
- 3) And as all things were made from contemplation of one, so all things were born from one adaptation.
- 4) Its father is the Sun, its mother is the Moon.
- 5) The wind carried it in its womb, the earth breast fed it.
- 6) It is the father of all 'works of wonder' (Telesmi) in the world.
- 6a) Its power is complete (integra).
- 7) If cast to (turned towards- versa fuerit) earth,
- 7a) it will separate earth from fire, the subtile from the gross.
- 8) With great capacity it ascends from earth to heaven. Again it descends to earth, and takes back the power of the above and the below.
- 9) Thus you will receive the glory of the distinctiveness of the world. All obscurity will flee from you.

motivated by a desire to contain the mysteries of the universe<sup>162</sup>. The renaissance was driven above all by a sense of regaining lost classical knowledge that could be reconstructed by study. According to Ashmole: "many secrets of nature had been divulged in remote antiquity and hence were available by careful scrutiny of ancient lore."<sup>163</sup> Occasionally a collector would state openly their hermetic credo: Athanasius Kircher's museum had upon its ceiling the inscription: "Whosoever perceives the chain that binds the world below to the world above will know the mysteries of nature and achieve miracles."<sup>164</sup> His collection displayed a mermaid's tail, a giant's bones, optical illusions and other rarities. A particular interest in things that stood astride established elemental boundaries has been noted by Mauriès: one might expect to find petrified creatures, hybrids and freaks given places of honour in the cabinet<sup>165</sup>. It is here, in the early Renaissance, before the Enlightenment had coloured the discovery of rationalism, that we find a methodology of display that lends itself to creative display and hermetic pleasure.

By the early Nineteenth Century the stereotypical antiquarian gentleman dilettante had become well enough established so that in 1816 Walter Scott could sell in six days a spectacular six thousand copies of his novel "The Antiquary", including in it his description of a late Eighteenth Century antiquarian's chaotic den (note the familiar cat, a hint at the occult flavour of the eponymous character's den):

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10) This is the whole most strong strength of all strength, for it overcomes all subtle things, and penetrates all solid things.

11a) Thus was the world created.

12) From this comes marvelous adaptations of which this is the procedure.

13) Therefore I am called Hermes, because I have three parts of the wisdom of the whole world.

14) And complete is what I had to say about the work of the Sun, from the book of Galieni Alfachimi."

<sup>162</sup> Mauriès, 25

<sup>163</sup> *Op. Cit.* Mauriès, 135

<sup>164</sup> *Op. Cit.* G. Olmi *Tout les Savoirs du Monde* p.275

<sup>165</sup> Mauriès, 34

*"It was, indeed, some time before Lovel could, through the thick atmosphere, perceive in what sort of den his friend had constructed his retreat. It was a lofty room of middling size, obscurely lighted by high narrow latticed windows. One end was entirely occupied by book-shelves, greatly too limited in space for the number of volumes placed upon them, which were, there fore, drawn up in ranks of two or three files deep, while numberless others littered the floor and the tables, amid a chaos of maps, engravings, scraps of parchment, bundles of papers, pieces of old armour, swords, dirks, helmets, and Highland targets. Behind Mr. Oldbuck's seat (which was an ancient leathern-covered easy-chair, worn smooth by constant use), was a huge oaken cabinet, decorated at each corner with Dutch cherubs, having their little duck-wings displayed, and great jolter-headed visages placed between them. The top of this cabinet was covered with busts, and Roman lamps and paterae, intermingled with one or two bronze figures. The walls of the apartment were partly clothed with grim old tapestry, representing the memorable story of Sir Gawaine's wedding, in which full justice was done to the ugliness of the Lothely Lady; although, to judge from his own looks, the gentle knight had less reason to be disgusted with the match on account of disparity of outward favour, than the romancer has given us to understand. The rest of the room was panelled, or wainscoted, with black oak, against which Scottish history, favourites of Mr. Oldbuck, and as many in tie-wigs and laced coats, staring representatives of his own ancestors. A large old-fashioned oaken table was covered with a profusion of papers, parchments, books, and nondescript trinkets and gew-gaws, which seemed to have little to recommend them, besides rust and the antiquity which it indicates. In the midst of this wreck of ancient books and utensils, with a gravity equal to Marius among the ruins of Carthage, sat a large black cat, which, to a superstitious eye, might have presented the genius loci, the tutelar demon of the apartment. The floor, as well as the table and chairs, was overflowed by the same mare magnum of miscellaneous trumpery, where it would have been as impossible to find any individual article wanted, as to put it to any use when discovered.*

*Amid this medley, it was no easy matter to find one's way to a chair, without stumbling over a prostrate folio, or the still more awkward mischance of overturning some piece of Roman or ancient British pottery. And, when the chair was attained, it had to be disencumbered, with a careful hand, of engravings which might have received damage, and of antique spurs and buckles, which would certainly have occasioned it to any sudden occupant. Of this the Antiquary made Lovel particularly aware, adding, that his friend, the Rev. Doctor Heavysterne from the Low Countries, had sustained much injury by sitting down suddenly and incautiously on three ancient calthrops, or craw-taes, which had been lately dug up in the bog near Bannockburn, and which, dispersed by Robert Bruce to lacerate the feet of the English chargers, came thus in process of time to endamage the sitting part of a learned professor of Utrecht."<sup>166</sup>*

This description of the chaos of the eponymous hero's den should give nightmares to a contemporary curator, but I find this utterly tempting. It is reminiscent of a child's visit to an archetypal attic, offering explorations of old dusty trunks, finding mysterious and exciting objects to play with, musty, interesting books in odd languages, perhaps

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<sup>166</sup> Scott, 1900, 37-38.

spiders or a skeleton of a long dead mouse. These are certainly qualities I want to give to people who visit my work.

The phenomenon of the modern public museum is confined to a narrow and recent period of time, with the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford holding the distinction of being the first publicly displayed collection of artefacts in a building built for the purpose. The artefacts originally displayed there were collected in the mid seventeenth Century by the naturalist John Tradescant (and his father) and upon his death in 1662 were given to Elias Ashmole, who in turn gave the collection to the University, who erected a building to house it that opened in 1683. We might imagine Tradescant's collection as a more tidily organized version of the chaotic chamber of Sir Scott's novel.



Figure 50. Gabriel de Saint-Aubin's *Cabinet of a Connoisseur*. Oil on wood. Musée des Beaux-Arts (inv. 975.4.149). Copyright Direction des Musées de France, 1994. Photo: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen.



Figure 51. *Musei Wormiani Historia* frontispiece from the *Museum Wormianum*  
An example of a typical Cabinet of Curiosities

We know what was in the Tradescant cabinet thanks to another delightful description in 1638 by German visitor Georg Christoph Stirm:

*In the museum of Mr. John Tradescant are the following things: first in the courtyard there lie two ribs of a whale, also a very ingenious little boat of bark; then in the garden all kinds of foreign plants, which are to be found in a special little book which Mr. Tradescant has had printed about them. In the museum itself we saw a salamander, a chameleon, a pelican, a remora, a lanhado from Africa, a white partridge, a goose which has grown in Scotland on a tree, a flying squirrel, another squirrel like a fish, all kinds of bright coloured birds from India, a number of things changed into stone, amongst others a piece of human flesh on a bone, gourds, olives, a piece of wood, an ape's head, a cheese, etc; all kinds of shells, the hand of a mermaid, the hand of a mummy, a very natural wax hand under glass, all kinds of precious stones, coins, a picture wrought in feathers, a small piece of wood from the cross of Christ, pictures in perspective of Henry IV and Louis XIII of France, who are shown, as in nature, on a polished steel mirror when this is held against the middle of the picture, a little box in which a landscape is seen in perspective, pictures from the church of S. Sophia in Constantinople copied by a Jew into a book, two cups of rinocerode, a cup of an E. Indian alcedo which is a kind of unicorn, many Turkish and other foreign shoes and boots, a sea parrot, a toad-fish, an elk's hoof with three claws, a bat as large as a pigeon, a human bone weighing 42 lbs., Indian arrows such as are used by the executioners in the West Indies- when a man is condemned to death, they lay open his back with them and he dies of it, an instrument used by the Jews in circumcision, some very light wood from Africa, the robe of the King of Virginia, a few goblets of agate, a girdle such as the Turks wear in Jerusalem, the passion of Christ carved very daintily on a plumstone, a large magnet stone, a S. Francis in wax under glass, as also a S. Jerome, the Pater Noster of Pope Gregory XV, pipes from the East*



*and West Indies, a stone found in the West Indies in the water, whereon are graven Jesus, Mary and Joseph, a beautiful present from the Duke of Buckingham, which was of gold and diamonds affixed to a feather by which the four elements were signified, Isidor's MS of de natura hominis, a scourge with which Charles V is said to have scourged himself, a hat band of snake bones'.<sup>167</sup>*

In Continental Europe prototypical museum collections had been opened earlier than in Britain, for example in 1582 the private collection of Medici artefacts had been moved for display into the upper floor of the converted Uffizi palace (“Uffizi” means “offices”) by Francesco I. The Uffizi museum itself opened to the public in 1737 when the last of the Medici, Anna Maria Lodovici entreated the collection to the trust of the House of Lorraine on condition that it remained in Florence for the edification of the public. Elsewhere in Europe the Louvre opened to the public in Paris in the revolutionary year of 1789, although the collection had been accessible to scholars and students since 1769. In the United States the Revolutionary War artist Charles Willson Peale<sup>168</sup> made museum culture his lifelong calling with the establishment in Philadelphia of the first American museum to be funded by public money, where he displayed live and mounted animals, fossils and his own portraits of the heroes of the War for Independence. An excellent example of the transition from a cabinet of curiosity to full fledged museum, the purpose of his museum was to offer:

*...the most instructive school for the naturalist, botanist, mineralogist, chemist, anatomist, mechanist, manufacturer, agriculturist, antiquarian and lover of the fine arts.<sup>169</sup>*

In Peale’s own work “The Artist in his Museum” (Fig. 52) we have an opportunity to see what both he and his museum looked like: at his feet stands a group of taxidermist’s

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<sup>167</sup> Ashmolean Museum website. Accessed at 4.51pm Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> January, 2006.

<http://www.ashmol.ox.ac.uk/ash/amulets/tradescant/tradescant03.html>

<sup>168</sup> Outside Philadelphia Peale is perhaps best known as the portraitist of George Washington.

<sup>169</sup> Sellers, 194.

tools and a mount of a turkey collected from the Rocky Mountains. A mastodon's bones lie in the foreground, while brushes and palette rest upon the table. Behind the grand theatrical drape we see a young lady turning her back to the displays of fauna, her hands raised in wonder as she beholds the gigantic skeleton of a dinosaur, while in the background a father takes the opportunity to teach his son of the birds of America.



Figure 52. "The Artist in His Museum" by Charles Willson Peale 1822. Photo: Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison, Jr. Collection)

It is instructive to compare the exhibit hall behind Peale's self-portrait with other renaissance collections from which museum display is clearly descended. We've all seen these ubiquitous images rendered in ostentatious oils: Giovanni Pannini's 1749 *Interior of a Picture Gallery with the Collection of Cardinal Gonzaga* (Fig. 53) is typical. In Peale's museum paintings were displayed in exactly the same way as the taxidermy cases, the fossils and live animals; clearly artefacts in this museum were viewed with

the same “weight” as works of art. In Gonzaga’s Picture Gallery paintings line the walls of a huge chamber with barely an inch of plaster showing between the gilded frames, while sculpture looms above. Small paintings are hung low, while huge pieces fill the upper levels, surrounded by portraits. On the left a group of men discuss etchings while a heap of the papers tumbles to the floor; small children regard a tome at the feet of the gentleman just left of centre, while the cardinal himself gestures at a Madonna held by a servant. Architectural and freestanding sculpture feature prominently, and piles of books are stacked on cushions and rugs.



Figure 53. Panini, Giovanni Paolo. 1749. *Interior of a Picture Gallery with the Collection of Cardinal Gonzaga*. Oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.

In the Cardinal's gallery the single piece that possesses any individual status is the Madonna, doubtless presented to the Cardinal by his lackey as a reminder that his wealth comes from God, a gesture that falls a little flat because the painting is so overwhelmingly concerned with extravagant display. Peale's museum was not as indiscriminate: he was an admirer of Linnaeus, and determined to categorize the items he collected.

In London an unusually late architectural cabinet, John Soane's Museum, remains open as it was left in its original setting and arrangement. The collection was opened to amateurs and students in 1887 upon Soane's death, who had arranged for an Act of Parliament to guarantee the availability of the collection and to keep it from his surviving son, of whom he disapproved. It's an interesting museum to visit because it represents a change in the development of display. Visitors to the collection are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of the architectural artefacts that completely cover the walls of three houses, but although the objects are never explained, and include a crossbow hung next to a classical sculpture, and slave chains suspended beside an alabaster sarcophagus, there is a sense of thematic classification that is absent from the seventeenth century collections.



Figure 54. Soane's Museum. Scanned from one of the Museum's postcards.

The Soane collection discriminates and is inspired by the approach of an encyclopaedist, although it does not yet offer itself as a descriptive catalogue of examples. By the mid-eighteenth century the esoteric background of the cabinets had largely been lost, replaced by a didactic classification that emphasised the differences between things instead of the similarities.

The desire of the visitor to be excited is central to the early museum experience. Peale's extravagant gesture as he dramatically pulls back his grand velvet drape to reveal proudly the galleries of his establishment is a gesture of the theatre, and it is this aspect of display in his museum that is of interest to me here. Peale was a showman at heart, and his museum, although regarded seriously by no less august a body than the American Philosophical Society, was as much a public place of entertainment as edification. When he passed away his sons continued his work until the collection was dispersed by sale at auction or lost in fire, then P.T. Barnum purchased a large part of the collection and showed it in conjunction with attention grabbing sideshows.

Aside from his interest in Peale's museum, Barnum was heavily invested in the Museum of Natural History in New York, which he acquired from John Scudder in 1842, turning the cabinet into a full-on freak show complete with midgets and performers. The earliest figures shown by the enterprising Mme Tussaud's were casts of the heads of victims of the guillotine (*Fig. 55*), some of whom she is said to have known during a stint as art teacher to Louis XVI's sister. Tussaud had herself been under threat of execution, and was imprisoned with her mother in the Bastille for a short time.



Figure 55. Madams Tussaud's wax heads of victims of the guillotine.  
Photo by Julie Wiskirchen.

The well-known London attraction originated as a travelling show taken on the road in 1803 over Britain and Ireland by Mme. Tussaud herself until she settled in 1835 upon a permanent site in London to display her famous wax figures, drawing a healthy crowd

and leaving her a wealthy lady<sup>170</sup>. Although specialized, her collection was the direct descendant of cabinets of curiosity, which often included both life and death masks cast in lifelike wax.

Contemporary museums that sit firmly within the tradition of cabinets of curiosity include David Wilson's Los Angeles *Museum of Jurassic Technology*, *Madame Tussaud's* in London; and the Twentieth Century newcomer *Ripley's Believe it or Not Museum* which presently appears as sixteen franchise attractions in the United States, and one each in Australia, Canada and Denmark<sup>171</sup>. Some claim to share the honourable intentions of Charles Willson Peale:

*The Museum of Jurassic Technology's in Los Angeles, California is an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic. Like a coat of two colors, the museum serves two functions. On the one hand the museum provides the academic community with a specialized repository of relics and artefacts from the Lower Jurassic, with an emphasis on those that demonstrate unusual or curious technological qualities. On the other hand the museum serves the general public by providing the visitor with a hands-on experience of "life in the Jurassic."(sic)<sup>172</sup>*

This is the territory for me, addicted to the arcane of the Neolithic. By referring to the cabinet of curiosity my work fits with the tradition of showmanship and mystery, a world where sensory experience and fine art have jostled for hundreds of years. My *Cabinet* takes its place among these displays, partly entertainment, partly educational. In the next section I look at practices of display that have impacted my choices in displaying the *Cabinet*.

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<sup>170</sup> Berridge 2006

<sup>171</sup> For more information about *Ripley's Believe it or Not* visit their website, Accessed Friday January 13, 2006 <http://www.ripleys.com/>

<sup>172</sup> From that venerable institution's handout: "The Museum of Jurassic Technology and You."

## **Methodologies for Contemporary Artists Interpreting Neolithic British Art and Architecture: “Artefacting” Methodology: Artefacts on Display**

The boundaries blur as freak show barkers call the crowds beside Ashmole and Peale to see artefacts of the eccentric and bizarre, basing their spectacles upon reality but stretching the truth. On the respectable end of the spectrum since the Eighteenth Century museums have become centrepieces to Western cities, acting as symbols of cultural superiority, education and national status. Objects shown in museums are cultural artefacts, including the art objects that we view as the apogee of our civilization, or objects taken from colonized cultures and displayed as symbols of their disenfranchisement. (It is notable that more than two thirds of the world’s museums are in the industrialized nations).

The concept of the masterpiece became deeply rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> Century academic art, developing from the Renaissance practice of apprentice artists offering their work for acceptance into the painters’ guilds: their “master-piece”. The course of art history from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries documents the transformation of this work from one that required adherence to rigid standards into a work that was expected to display individual genius that expressed freedom and originality.<sup>173</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century commercial gallery exhibit style became entrenched as individual masterpieces were viewed with special selectivity, given bulletproof glass to shelter behind, bank vaults within which to dwell, and security cameras to stand guard upon them. Galleries were hung now by placing all flat art hung on the wall centred at eye level, with at least as much space around the work as the work itself covered. Taken to its extreme, objects that were thought to be particular masterpieces were displayed in

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<sup>173</sup> Belting 2001, 17.



isolation, like the Euphronius Krater, now scandalously returned to Italy by the Metropolitan Museum of New York. This work was purchased in 1973 for a million dollars, and displayed alone with carefully focused lighting in its own room, emphasizing its stature as the supreme masterpiece of the classical antiquities collection in the collection.

In O'Doherty's interpretation of the relationship of the viewer to the work displayed in the gallery, the gallery is seen as the inheritor of liminal museum space favoured by enlightenment benefactors as reconstructions of classical temples<sup>174</sup>. Objects within these "temples of art" continue to be displayed with a reverence that is regarded by many as a replacement for the religious awe offered to holy relics fetched to Europe by returning crusaders.



Figure 56. Reliquary containing a fragment of the true cross  
Photo courtesy of the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore

Such objects, including the bones of saints and fragments of the true cross of Christ, became the destination points of a population pre-occupied with pilgrimage when

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<sup>174</sup> O'Doherty, 1999

enshrined within medieval churches and cathedrals, a fascination with travel to a fulfilling goal that ultimately became the tourist industry.

The gallery offers itself as an ersatz place of pilgrimage within the scope of international tourism, a place of sanctuary and transcendent transformation to visitors who come in search of representations of the “modern divine”, or to put it another way, a secular experience equivalent to religious enlightenment. Modern Curators sought to endow their collections with the “aura” of authenticity described by Walter Benjamin in his seminal *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*<sup>175</sup>. Here the work of art was an original object that possessed an aura of authenticity, and adopted the role of the religious artefacts collected by the wealthy during and after the crusading era. This “aura” was enhanced by the concentration of money about the object, exemplified by the multi-millions paid recently for the gilded Gustav Klimt *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, that quite appropriately resembles a humanist substitute for a religious icon.<sup>176</sup>

With a few hundred years of history behind vitrine display, visitors to galleries understand the semiotics of the glass case, opening this kind of display up to manipulation by artists working with an artefacting methodology. To display objects of little value in a display immediately transfers the semiotics of monetary and aesthetic value to the piece, enabling artists to manipulate the perceptions of visitors to their shows. Nor are vitrines without some sense of safe containment: we keep reptiles in terrariums, fish in aquariums. Glass cases were used at Peale’s museum to contain taxidermy displays because Peale found it impossible to prevent the public from

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<sup>175</sup> Benjamin, 1969

<sup>176</sup> Barker, 1999, 15

touching and damaging the feathers of his birds, despite a posted warning that the feathers were coated in arsenic!<sup>177</sup> The practice of display *in vitrine* has been used by artists throughout the Twentieth Century by various artists notably including the illustrious Joseph Beuys, the infamous Damien Hirst, and in the new Millennium by Kostabi, the notorious New York artist who has taken on the art-as-factory-produced-commodity mantle of Andy Warhol:

*I make a thousand paintings a year and out of those around fifty are duds. I lacerate those with a razor knife. I brought the lacerated remains to Arman's studio. We put those into clear plexi-glass boxes which then were sealed. We co-signed those with a razor blade on the Plexiglas. They are like time capsules of my rejected artworks. You can still see recognizable Kostabi images. You can see inside from all sides. They are quite heavy which surprised me. Thanks to Arman's genius he turned my trash into treasure.<sup>178</sup>*

While we may question Kostabi's evidence for the "genius" of Arman, his comment that placing the destroyed paintings in a glass case turned "trash into treasure" clearly points to the transformational nature of the practice.

Similarly, lighting may be seen to act as a glass case in museum displays. The soft lighting that makes objects seem to glow independently does not originate in commercial display as suggested by Barker<sup>179</sup>, but in theatrical lighting. The spotlight beam on the stage focuses the attention of the spectator upon the character or place that the director and lighting designer wish. As a controlling technology that is used effectively to control the gaze its role in the gallery setting is to enhance the significance

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<sup>177</sup> Sellers 1980, 38

<sup>178</sup> Jones, 2006, 8

<sup>179</sup> Barker 1999, 15. I do not intend to detract from Barker's commentary on the use of lighting in the context of a Marxist approach to cultural objects as fetishes, but simply wish to correct her inaccurate observation about the origins of gallery lighting.

of an object within its surroundings: objects are transformed by the spotlight beyond the everyday mundane.

After the First World War it became apparent that the old order had brought reason to its logical but frightful conclusion and cost the lives of a generation. With their wholesale rejection of Imperial culture the Dadaists swept away the academic expectations of what art could be, and began the modernist deconstruction that was to continue throughout the Twentieth Century. Artists quickly began to respond to museums as places of display: recognizing that galleries offered a context that affected the perception of the objects displayed, they manipulated the relationship between viewer and artefact by showing mundane items that were transformed into works of art simply by their presentation. Artists working with the presentation of "found" objects deal with issues of the context of display of artefacts, the relationship between the public and the set-aside gallery space. Writing that concerns the most well known of these artists, Marcel Duchamp, has occupied an inordinate amount of space in books, histories and critiques of the art of the twentieth century, in particular the lengthy discussion of his found object *Fountain* (Fig. 58) that continues to this day, recently in Donald Kuspit's *End of Art*.

Kuspit predictably takes *Fountain* as an example of the dilemma he sees in the contemporary art world: the question of the aesthetic value of the readymade<sup>180</sup>. But the century old conflict caused by Duchamp's insinuation of the urinal into the museum is made possible by the sanctified liminal space of the gallery, and the consternation that its display continues to cause simply reflects the concern of the guardians of museum culture, who have correctly felt embattled by the forces of cultural change. Kuspit's

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<sup>180</sup> Kuspit 2004, 22-24.

irritation at *Fountain* is misplaced; Duchamp is simply doing what antiquarians had done two hundred years before by introducing disparate elements into the gallery; in the presence of other objects in the Tradescant collection - a typical cabinet of curiosity - Duchamp's urinal would hardly have raised an eyebrow. Executioner's tools! Devices for circumcision! Charles V's scourge! Wood from the Holy Cross! A stink ant with a fungus-spiked head! Against such attention grabbing delicacies, an overturned urinal simply isn't a threat. Man Ray's photograph of the Surrealist exhibition at the Charles Ratton Gallery in 1936 serves to underscore this relationship: Duchamp's bottle rack readymade is displayed in a vitrine alongside other surrealist objects of curiosity (*Fig. 57*).



Figure 57. A Surrealist Display including Duchamp's readymade bottle rack. Photo by Man Ray

Because Renaissance cabinets are “a reflection on the impossibility of recapturing the past and on the irresistible desire to do so”<sup>181</sup> the surrealist cabinet here makes an

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<sup>181</sup> Mauriès, 2002, 229

attempt to restore the past, having rejected the imperial culture and returned to the culture of display of the hermetic early enlightenment.

André Breton, the “godfather of surrealism” made a display of his home, describing it in this invitation to the public:

*Among some two hundred entries in the catalogue, we find “natural objects”, minerals (crystals containing water one hundred thousand years old), plants (carnivorous species), animals (giant ant-eater, an egg laid by one “oexpyorhix”), “interpretations of natural objects” (a monkey among ferns) or “incorporated” into sculptures, and “disrupted objects” (that is modified by natural forces, fires, storms, etc). Here, revealed to the public for the first time, are several objects from Picasso’s studio, which take their place, historically, alongside the celebrated “ready-mades”, and “assisted ready-mades” of Marcel Duchamp, also on display. Finally, so-called “savage” objects, the finest fetishes and masks from the Americas and Oceania, selected from Charles Ratton’s private collection. The “mathematical objects” are astonishing incarnations in concrete form of the subtlest problems of three dimensional geometry, while the “found objects” and “interpreted found objects” lead us to the “surrealist objects” proper.<sup>182</sup>*

This is an early Twentieth Century cabinet of curiosities! And Breton was not the only surrealist to be deeply involved in collecting, deeply interested in the presentation of the object *qua* object. Thus, when properly placed in the context of museum history we see that instead of de-sanctifying the display space Duchamp’s *Fountain* gesture reminds us that the specialized art gallery space originates from collections of curiosities, and that the only difference between a bronze-age chamber pot and a contemporary chamber pot is two or three millennia. With *Fountain*, Duchamp successfully begins the closure of the circle of the narrative of display in its return to the cabinet.

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<sup>182</sup> *op. cit.* Mauriès, 216



Left: Figure 58. Duchamp, Marcel. 1917. *Fountain*. Readymade. Photo: Alfred Stieglitz  
Right: Figure 59. Toilet Display. Photo courtesy of Gladstone Pottery Museum

It is amusing to note that since the days of the outrageous appearance of Duchamp's *Fountain*, displays of toilets have become almost commonplace. Among many toilet themed exhibits there is now an International Toilet Museum in Delhi; a permanent display of toilets in the London Science Museum; in Stratford upon Avon the Thomas Crapper Company has a small toilet museum and the American Sanitary Plumbing Museum operates in Worcester, Massachusetts. (Specialised cabinets all.)

Although it is clear that readymade sculpture was a product of its time and the art gallery environment of its time, depending entirely upon acceptance of the art gallery as specialized museum space for the display of objects representing the height of cultured good taste, Duchamp's question continues to be raised with more or less success by a wide variety of contemporary artists. A notable example among Duchamp and surrealist camp-followers is David Mach, cited by Renfrew as an example of an artist who is chiefly concerned with consumerism<sup>183</sup>. At first glance Mach's work may seem far removed from the mud and rock of archaeology that is Renfrew's specialty, but he has

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<sup>183</sup> Renfrew 2004, 17.

chosen Mach because his polemical use of fetish domestic goods runs parallel to the display of artefacts in museum collections.



Figure 60. Trophy Room, 1995. David Mach. Ujazdowski Castle, Poland

In his *Trophy Room* installation Mach takes the objects of desire of consumers in the late twentieth century and offers them as trophies in a simulated manor house snooker room. It should also be emphasized both that this is just such a room that might contain an antiquarian collection such as that described by Scott, and that the artefacts of antiquarian archaeological cabinets were viewed in much the same way as trophy animal heads.

Renfrew goads archaeologists with Mach's work reminding them that the display of objects uncovered in excavation has an enduring history that runs parallel to the display of the trophies of the hunt. But any one of these objects can be taken as the analogue of *Fountain*; Mach's achievement in placing his iconic objects in the trophy room in fact is to open up the origins of Duchamp's work for us. As technicians of the cabinet, surrealists and their descendants may be seen as reactionaries attempting to bring back



an occult and arcane view of the world as a hermetic and irrational place. The found object may be seen as the curio or oddity restored from its relegated place in museum storerooms to its place on display. In a way the Surrealists succeeded: irrational, global post-modernism has prevailed, irony laden but as arcane and self-referential as the cabinets.

### **Methodologies for Contemporary Artists Interpreting Neolithic British Art and Architecture: “Artefacting” Methodology: The Sensory Cabinet and the Neolithic**

This section pursues the idea that the display of objects can be a sensory experience, which fits with the Neolithic use of their decorative art and the creation of the monumental architecture. The practices of contemporary artists are used to develop ideas of display for use with the *Cabinet*.

The work of Tim Hawkinson presents an example of an artist using the art gallery as a cabinet of curiosities for the display of eccentric exhibits; his 2005 show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was wildly imaginative and highly entertaining, the true inheritor of the popular exhibits of the nineteenth Century. Reactionary voices will respond to this as the wanton defilement of the gallery, which indeed it is if the role of museums as houses of enlightenment is thought to continue into our post-historical period. If however the art museum is something other than a display room for cultural objects then this is a cabinet of curiosities *par excellence*, with the artist himself as the anthropological project. In place of an obscure specimen from a colonial land a tiny bird made from the artist's fingernail clippings stands in its own display case; instead of a trophy animal head an elephant made of tinfoil is flattened cartoon-like against a wall.



Figure 61. Tim Hawkinson, *Bird*, 1997. Photo: Ace Gallery 2"(H) x 2' 1/4"(W) x 2"(D)  
The Artist's Finger Nail Parings

In comparison to Hawkinson's work and exhibited concurrently at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art the display of the artefacts of the Tutankhamun excavation used many of the same tricks of display, showing the treasures of the young Pharaoh in a walkthrough installation in which the visitor *experienced* the show rather than being presented with materials for edification. Soft but carefully focused lighting directed the guests' attention on key features, as they passed through warmly coloured and windowless spaces, accompanied by the soft chatter of headset commentary. Like the Hawkinson exhibit the emphasis of the exhibit was not on information but sensuality, with the notable exception of touch in both cases, despite the urge to feel the texture of Hawkinson's work and a desire to make connection with the past through touching artefacts with the Tutankhamen show.

The 2006 *Ecstasy* show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles went even further to ground the exhibition as a sensory experience. The exhibit was

specifically concerned with the expression of altered states by contemporary artists, with galleries transformed into an acid-head's dream, including an homeopathic LSD fountain; an installation in a darkened room with smoke and shifting lighting; a strobe light illuminating water as it rained from a pipe; a movie of a woman flying. A sound sensitive light flickered as a dialogue track played; a moving bench was activated when visitors sat on it; paintings appeared to move; and a couple of video explorations of schizophrenia or madness played. In a *tour de force* of art that represents the conflicted relationship between artists and the display of their work in museum spaces, a gigantic bare wall was presented as a work in its own right, creeping almost imperceptibly across the large hall on a track concealed within its footprint. If a measure of the success of the show is to be found in works that dealt with sensual experience then this was the show's greatest and yet (paradoxically) most minimal achievement, that an immense bare wall, devoid of mark-making, apparently untouched by an artists hand could itself be a work of art. This was secret, occulted art, art that included with a nod and a wink, completely dedicated to the delight of the senses and the inspiration of excitement.

The practice of "Artefacting" has come full circle since the early days of museum display; the atmosphere has changed a little in that in the post-historical period of globalization exhibits that are founded on colonial anthropology are less acceptable, but we appear to be embarking upon a new era of popular exhibits based on what Rosenthal refers to as "enchantments". Galleries looking for a methodology of display are caught between the colonial anthropological approach, with the work of individual artists representing the authentic masterpiece, and an entertainment approach that

adapts the cabinet and takes it to sensory extremes. Rosenthal suggests that the goal of this type of installation is to provide:

*"...a full bodied escape from reality, in which someone else's aura and world view dominate the viewer's entire perceptual field."<sup>184</sup>*

Disneyland functions in this way; Toontown's artificial skyline is built so that none of the outside world intrudes on the somewhat lurid and overwhelming colour scheme and distortion of reality (Fig. 62). At Disneyland piped music plays constantly; the outside world is denied access, except in the clothing of visitors and in the food they eat. In efforts to include even these aspects of life in the theme visitors to the park are encouraged to buy Disney hats and shirts, and other odd accessories that encourage their participation in the spectacle, and offered Disney food vended from art-directed wagons.



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<sup>184</sup> Rosenthal 2003, 39

Figure 62. Mickey's house, Toontown. Note the artificial skyline precluding view of the real world.  
Photo: JustDisney.com

Museum curators have taken note of the success of Disneyland and use tricks of the theme park experience in their halls. Windows have disappeared from the Tutankhamen show since the 1970's tour of the artefacts, as they have from most contemporary exhibitions, as both curators and installation artists seek to exclude the outside world and provide an all-encompassing sensory experience. They are anathema because they reveal the rejected world while the exhibits are creations that seek to control and shape the viewer's experience of the time and space<sup>185</sup>.

We can find similarities here to the control of the landscape in the altered earth works of Neolithic Avebury, where the Neolithic visitor was faced with an environment that was restricted from view by the enormous ditch and embankment already discussed (*Fig. 63*). A visitor's entrance to the circle was probably made after following the serpentine avenue of stones from the Sanctuary (a wooden circle of posts, perhaps with lintels and an interior concealed from view by lattice fences)<sup>186</sup> and arriving at the causeway to the South of the monument. Here the view was blocked by two immense stones that prevented outside views of the inner circle, the ring stone, the obelisk and the work within the enclosure<sup>187</sup>.

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<sup>185</sup> Rosenthal 2003, 35

<sup>186</sup> Pitts 284-285

<sup>187</sup> Burl 1979, 174



Figure 63. The high embankment at Avebury, concealing the outside world from view. Photo by the Author

Assuming he successfully negotiated whatever forces prevented his access, he would have found himself then within a carefully controlled environment with high banks that prevented insiders seeing the ordinary landscape outside, just like Disneyland. While the *Cabinet* is not like Mickey's house in reality, there are tools here that are helpful in terms of display: a controlled and enclosed space where the outside world is excluded, in order to heighten the sensory experience of the created environment.

### **Methodologies for Contemporary Artists Interpreting Neolithic British Art and Architecture: Responsive Methodology: Interventions and Contemporary Responses**

It is within *Responsive Methodology* that we may see the most interesting creative work by other artists who are particularly influenced by prehistoric Britain. New work that is clearly rooted in the practices of ancient Britain but is decidedly contemporary is

particularly inspiring. We can make contemporary art that responds to ancient cultures and uses ideas found in them as a creative framework.

## Interventions

Responses to Neolithic art need not be made from scratch. Both legal and destructive illegal transformations of existing Neolithic sites have been extraordinarily effective in catching the attention of the media and the hostility of both the archaeological and neo-pagan communities. In 1996 vandals painted strange patterns onto eight Avebury megaliths, causing consternation among archaeologists and others who love the stones (*Fig. 64*).



Figure 64. Vandalised Megalith at Avebury 1996. Photo courtesy of English Heritage

When activists protesting genetically modified food again attacked the stones with paint in 1999 the vandals brushed red and green paint onto the megaliths there was little aesthetic merit to recommend their action (*Fig. 65*). In an effort to retard the drying of the paint the stones were again wrapped in hessian and rope (*Fig. 66*).



Figure 65. Avenue stone under restoration in 2000 after 1999 attack.  
Photo by Pete Glastonbury

Once wrapped and bound, the stones resembled the work of Christo and Jean-Claude, the well-known installation artists who in the course of their work have wrapped islands, bridges and buildings. Others were interested in their wrapped appearance: a photograph of the stones appeared on the cover of *British Archaeology*, presumably because editor Mike Pitts seeks out images he finds striking in order to sell more copies of his magazine.





Figure 66. Wrapped Stone. Avebury 1996. Photo courtesy of Littlestone.

The binding of the stones made them appear dangerous, as if the cloth and rope was an attempt to contain their strength. The element of danger is something entirely fitting to the ancient perception of the enclosed circles, as we have seen in the Neolithic practice of going to extreme lengths to construct ditches and banks to enclose areas, as if to keep something in, not out. A similar image appeared when archaeologist Christopher Tilley created a wonderful cover for his *The Materiality of Stone*<sup>188</sup> (Fig. 67) that attracted attention as a work of art in its own right. Tilley wrapped the doorway stones of a Bronze Age house found at Leskernick Hill on Bodmin Moor, Cornwall in cling-film, which was then painted bright yellow. This intervention was very effective, drawing attention to the difference in the material of the doorway to the material of the

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<sup>188</sup> Tilley, 2004

outside world. Prior to the radical change in colour the tumbled stones of the doorway looked like many other rough rocks scattered in the landscape; Tilley's work completely changed the dynamics of the landscape by framing the view from the doorway within the ancient house.

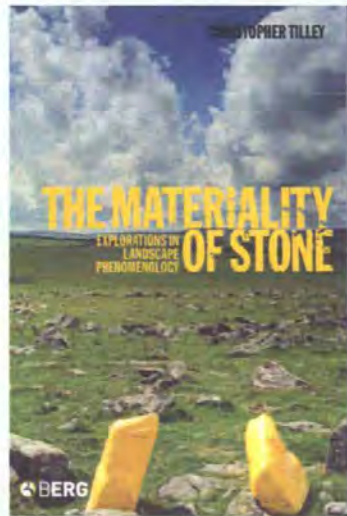


Figure 67. *The Materiality of Stone*. Book Cover. Christopher Tilley

Tilley's other intervention at Leskernick Hill was to build a portable doorframe that he carried to differing locations among the ruined houses, in an effort to transform his perception of the landscape as it would have been framed in the destroyed entrances to these old homes. Because this intervention relied on structural materials that were brought to the site rather than an intervention made upon the existing landscape these images were arguably less successful than the yellow stones.

In 2003 Anish Kapoor's sculpture *Turning the World Inside Out*, installed for a month at the Rollright Stones near Chipping Norton, successfully turned visitor's views of the megalithic circle inside out.



Figure 68. *Turning the World Inside Out*, 2003 Anish Kapoor, Photo by David James

Kapoor's work has no Neolithic roots, but here interacts with a Neolithic setting, reflecting the ancient stones in the highly polished surface of the stainless steel sculpture. This is responsive intervention at its peak – the work is in direct relationship to the Neolithic circle, in dialogue with it, but it has no relationship to the world-view of the people who made it. Kapoor's work attracts our attention to the old within the scope of the contemporary world. Capturing the nature of all works in the category of intervention, Kapoor said in his press release:

*I enthusiastically support the Art Fund project in its bid to take art out of its usual gallery setting and place it in a different context. I hope this will show that the modern and the ancient have the same intention and will bring new audiences to appreciate the beauty of both.*<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Chipping Norton Website. Accessed Monday April 10<sup>th</sup> 2006.  
<http://www.chippingnorton.net/Features/kapoor.htm>

Interventions and response both exploit the relationship of our present to the past, requiring the examination of both cultures, the existential “where do we come from” and forcing us to compare the similarities and differences of our culture to that of the past. Self-reflection is a useful individual habit that we perhaps need to apply to our culture in order to maintain its health.

### **Beginning the Work**

While learning the archaeology and prehistory of Britain I was concurrently committed to keeping notebooks of my ideas and drawings of potential works. I attempted a variety of ideas on paper that did not become physical pieces in the exhibit, and made several works that were not preconceived in a sketch, but originated purely as thought forms. By being immersed in Neolithic Archaeology for several years I found many ideas percolated out of my imagination without much formalization; on one occasion I dreamed about making a work that became *Rock, Paper, Scissors*.

I chose materials that were appropriate to but not restricted to the Neolithic period. I am not attempting to become a Neolithic Man, but to respond to Neolithic ideas in the new Millennium. Archaeologists use plaster to create moulds of objects and impressions left behind by artifacts that have long ago disappeared and I enjoy the possibilities of representing absence by using the material for mould-making. Neolithic Man used wood that possesses strength and flexibility and combines endless uses including the creation of charcoal alluded to in the section on fire; I used simple hardwood from the lumberyard as supports for objects that appear to be artifacts of a contemporary Neolithic culture. The *Cabinet* acts as a repository for the arcane objects that bring the

art of the Neolithic into new works; I act as the mediator between the two cultures by bringing ancient ideas to a present day audience.

### **Artefacts and Phenomena**

Interpreting Neolithic art and architecture requires an understanding of the artefacts of the period, regardless of the methodology used to interpret them into contemporary art. In this section differing objects remaining from the period and their use to artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> millennium are considered.

In archaeological terms artefacts are objects that have been made by humans, normally portable objects that are distinct from complex structures like buildings.<sup>190</sup> Here the meaning is extended to include what archaeologists in a pedantic mood might describe as *ecofacts*, i.e. those things that were not made by human hand, but used by them.<sup>191</sup>

### **Fire, Charcoal and Ash: Materials for Producing Art**

I used ashes in several of the pieces in the *Cabinet*. Ash is purified by fire, the material essence of a formerly living thing. It has passed through the intensity of fire and remains inviolate. I see the ritual use of ash described by Eliade and explored at some length earlier in the thesis as an important aspect of my creative process. When it shows up in my work it tends to refer to our absent ancestors. When I work with ashes I like to use bare hands so I feel the almost silky quality of the material.

A description of fire written while sitting beside the fire-pit, Granada Hills, California:

*Lighting the fire is exciting, watching the flames begin to touch the wood and kindling. I use lighter fluid and matches, while Neolithic man struck flints into tinder, used a bow, or*

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<sup>190</sup> Ewen, 5, 2003.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 6.

*kept the fire going every day. The actual process of lighting the fire is routine, everyday. The smell of distilled spirits is first, then the smell of smoke as tinder quickly ignites. First the flames are quick and agile, moving across newspaper and dry kindling and turning them into twisting black whirls that crumble down from the logs into the bottom of the pit. As the flames begin to burn larger sticks the contrast between untouched wood and blackened kindling is enhanced. I see flames touching raw wood but not marking it. Steam or smoke begins to come out of the ends of the logs. I position a seat away from the direction of the wind-blown smoke. I notice that I have become more relaxed as the fire becomes successfully established and develops an orange centre beneath the logs (Why is fire so often described as red?).*

*The light of the fire emphasizes the darkness of shadows in clearings; the black void beyond the circle of light offered by the campfire is the darkest of blacks. Sparks penetrate the darkness above the fire. Trees appear to move in the firelight.*

*Fire transforms wood into charcoal, purifying it into a new fuel. Fire both destroys and offers life. Fire cooks and burns food; it causes pain but gives the pleasure of warmth. As the primal element of spiritual change, fire makes possible the fundamental transformation of stone into metal; the primitive act of industry that allows transcendence of humanity over the material world. (When Arthur draws the sword from the stone, he is enacting a primal role as blacksmith. Metal is made from stone that is melted; swords may be created that hold immense power in comparison to earlier stone axes. Blacksmiths are prototypical alchemists, capable of the mystic act of transmutation of elements.)<sup>192</sup>*

Fire is so much a part of the archaeology of Neolithic architecture that it is hard to find any report made since the advent of modern methodologies that does not report charcoal in prehistoric contexts. It is hard for us to imagine the absolute necessity for fire in everyday life in the Neolithic period.

If Eliade's construct is used to describe cairns as places used for symbolic burial in the temple fetish house or for a symbolic descent to the underworld, fire becomes evidence of a view of cairns as houses of the dead. In their book *Architecture and Order* Colin Richards and Mike Parker Pearson offer a tantalizing glimpse into ancient Orcadian life in a brief commentary on the material remains of Neolithic houses found in the Islands. During his excavation of the settlement at Barnhouse, nearby the Stenness stone circle, Richards became aware that not only were the hearths of the houses he uncovered uniformly placed in the centre of the houses, but that they shared a second

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<sup>192</sup> Author's journal. Spring 2006

common characteristic; they were nearly all aligned on the entrance doorways about a North-West to South-East axis.<sup>193</sup> He considered the implications of the use of fire in the Northern Isles, where winter is dark and very cold. Domestic fires are known to have been kept burning for over forty years in the historical record of life in the Scottish highlands, and in the past it was thought a shameful matter to let the fire go out, for in the harsh environment of the Islands the fire was central to staying alive; thus it may be thought of as a potent symbol, carrying with it concepts of light, life, danger and mystery.

Fire was clearly extremely important to the users of Cairns. A survey of Orcadian examples shows that in cases where excavation was properly documented most of the buildings show evidence of fire on artefacts and/or bones discovered or the effects of fire on the stones of the walls, or charcoal on the floor. The table in Appendix 1 clearly illustrates the abundance of evidence that fire was an essential part of the use of the chambered cairns. Of the twenty-nine cairns that were excavated only seven report no evidence of fire, and of those seven, two were excavated and recorded poorly in the nineteenth century, and three are lacking reports.

Fire may have been used within the cairns as part of a cleansing rite preparing the chamber, or the use of charcoal as fuel used within the performance of rites of passage. Charcoal has been viewed as the remains of fires made from wood, but we may be overlooking the use of charcoal as a fuel in its own right; the charcoal found in cairns may be the remnants of the fuel supply used on a small scale in order to burn incense.

In Eliade's analysis charcoal and ashes are used to cover the skin of initiates. We cannot offer evidence of such practice in Orkney except to note the apparently purifying

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<sup>193</sup> Pearson / Richards 1994, 46.

nature of charcoal in the cairns. At Unstan and at the Knowe of Craie the floor was completely coated in a layer of charcoal and peat, and fires made outside of The Howe and Bigland Round have been left unexplained, but may have been set in order to produce charcoal and ashes as elements of ceremony; fire need not be viewed only as a tool for cooking, but as a means of creating ritual materials. Ash and charcoal was found in small quantities on the floors of eight of the chambered cairns that have been listed here, and it should be noted that fragments of charcoal and ash are unlikely to have been high on the list of priorities of hack-and-sack Nineteenth Century antiquarians like Farrer or Hebden, so there are likely to be unrecorded examples.

We know charcoal was used in European prehistory for creating what appear to be medical tattoos; the so-called "ice man" Otzi, has examples of these on his body. In his case it seems likely that he was cut, then fine powdered charcoal was rubbed into the cuts, probably as a medicinal treatment for bone disease in these areas.

I used charcoal and ashes in making *Ash Cone* and *Snake Box II*. In the former I made a clear reference to Julian Thomas' excavation, while the latter refers to the deposits of ash found in the chambered mounds. I have added some bones to *Ash Cone* and *Snake Box II* since the *Cabinet* show, having acquired a "retired" medical school skeleton, but will not invite contemporary disgust by being explicit in documentation of this, but instead explain it only to people who are fully engaged in the work.



## Food (and Wax)

Examples of Neolithic food are rare, because organic remains obviously do not last well over millennia. We know that food was used in ritual contexts; at Isbister hundreds of fish bones and shells were found on the floor; at Durrington Walls Parker-Pearson interprets arrow shot pig bones as the remains of a pig hunting celebration within the earthworks and connected with winter solstice observations.<sup>194</sup>

Sometimes food can surprise us: in 1984, a well-preserved Iron Age corpse<sup>195</sup> was found in a peat-bog near Lindow in Cheshire. The remains were the upper half of the body of a man who had been thrice killed by garrotting with a piece of corded animal sinew, being hit on the head, fracturing his skull, and being stabbed neatly in the jugular. His stomach contained the remains of a charred cracker of unleavened wheat, rye and barley, and the pollen of mistletoe, a plant sacred to the druids. Anne Ross suggested that he was a sacrificial victim of the druids and that this was his last ritual meal, and the injuries represented a ritual triple death.<sup>196</sup>



Figure 75, 76. Neolithic Bread and Mead. Photos by Ernst F. Tonsing

<sup>194</sup> Time Team. Channel Four television special. First screened 28<sup>th</sup> November 2005 on British television.

<sup>195</sup> Probably 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD.

<sup>196</sup> Jimenez, 1996, 148

At the opening reception to the Cabinet I gave visitors bread that I had made earlier in the day, and mead to drink. The bread was made with oat flour, brewer's yeast, honey, salt, milk and butter; ingredients that were available in the Neolithic. Apart from the clear relationship to the Christian communion ritual, my guests participated in a liminal rite that made them part of a select group of people who had attended a specialized event designed only for invited initiates. Eating and drinking the bread and mead also opened communion with the Neolithic ancestors, as we ate special food that had been prepared in a ritual context, within a special space that had been prepared for a ritual event, the opening of the show. I invited questions and described the creative process, inviting people to participate in enjoying the experience of the show as a liminal experience and remember our collective ancestors. (Fig. 77)



Figure 77. Explaining the Cabinet to guests at the Opening Reception. Photo by Barry Burns

Wax is the product of exploiting the work of bees, and can be used for creating candles, sealing jars for the preservation of food, as a base for poultices, as a mould making material. I use it as a liminal material, neither food nor excreta, not solid or liquid. It was found at Balfarg with the organic remains of Henbane, probably a remnant of pot-sealing.

### **Wood**

The transition from wood to stone may have been particularly important in rites of passage in the Neolithic, as we have seen at Durrington Walls. Wood posts are the in-between symbol of the dead, arranged in circular patterns, allowed to rot and rebuilt repeatedly; they resemble and precede the nemetons of the Bronze and Iron Age

druids, and perhaps, like their wooded groves described by Caesar and Lucan, the posts were carved to resemble the faces of the gods. I wrote about wood in my journal, reproduced here:

*Wood can be very hard and very soft; it rots and can be eaten by certain insects. Wood is shape-able and holds its shape. It is useful as a tool, but is not strong enough to bear sustained beating as stone can. Wood burns and creates warmth, and may be used to make charcoal or ashes for mark making. Wood makes roofing and shelter; it makes fences to contain stock. Wood is alive but not alive, and is therefore transitional. Trees represent safety, but also they sit between heaven and earth, meaning that parasitic plants that grow in their branches, including the legendary mistletoe, are particularly potent liminal plants. Trees like the oak bear fruit that sustains life, but might also be lethally poisonous like the yew. They are the homes of animals, birds, insects, reptiles and mammals.<sup>197</sup>*

Oak is well-known as the druids' sacred wood, less well known is the fact that it was used in the construction of the inner chambers of Neolithic long barrows. At Haddenham, Cambridgeshire, a Fenland barrow was excavated revealing an oaken lining cut from a single tree<sup>198</sup>. Burl notes that many long barrows were wooden mortuary structures that had been covered in earth and extended after being burned.

Eliade repeatedly notes the significance of the tree as a shaman's place in his work<sup>199</sup>, including the story of Odin who is suspended upside down in a tree, gaining supernatural sight. Gaulish druids reportedly sacrificed victims dedicated to Esus by hanging them from trees and cutting their veins so that their blood soaked into the ground beneath them<sup>200</sup> interpreting omens from the way it flowed<sup>201</sup>.

Wood is one of the fundamental elements of my work, which is largely made of wood, plaster, wax, and stone. I made the *Solar Cross* from telephone poles that were

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<sup>197</sup> Notes from the Author's journal, 2005. (Acorns)

<sup>198</sup> Francis Pryor reported this in his *Britain BC*, starting internet rumours of a long barrow with an oak tunnel cut through a single trunk.

<sup>199</sup> Eliade,

<sup>200</sup> Rutherford, 1993, 85.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

given to me by a friend who in Santa Barbara, a ninety-mile distance from my home. We borrowed a truck and drove up to get them, but the weather turned against us and rain began to pour down as we arrived. Ten feet long logs that had been light enough for one man to move became behemoths that the two of us could not lever into our truck. Not to be defeated, we enlisted the help of two passers by who fortunately saw helping two complete strangers lift dirty chunks of tree out of the mud as a worthwhile way to spend their time, and we eventually hauled the wood to the location of the workshop. Here I worked for a day with a chainsaw trimming them to the correct size to create the stepped lines of *Solar Cross*. In the process of this I gained a sense of respect for the labour it took to create one of the wood monuments of the Mesolithic and Neolithic.

### **Rope.**

I collected stinging nettles from the trail into the mountains behind my home. A half-mile into the National Forest there is a nettle-surrounded concrete pool, built when this area was used for cattle grazing range, fed with sulfurous water from a spring that seeps from the hillside across the path, steered by a pipe. The pool is incongruously but imaginatively stocked with goldfish and overhung by a variety of trees. In romantic spirits my children and I once clad the tree with dozens of rags tied to the overhanging branches. This was also the site for a woven cross circle that I made from the hanging branches trimmed from the tree. The cross circle was placed in the crook of two branches and let be. Sadly, one year the entire site was vandalized with a chainsaw, perhaps because of local fundamentalist Christian reaction to the rags and the cross circle. Thankfully, nature quickly regenerated the area, and now it is more verdant than

it was before the assault, although the overhanging branches are gone the nettles return every spring.

The impressions of Neolithic rope have been found on so many pots that “corded” ware takes its name from the practice of decorating the soft clay surface by pushing the twisted cord into it. Nettle fibre thread dating from the early Neolithic was found holding flint arrowheads onto wooden shafts beside the Sweet track in Somerset, where willow and hazel that had been twisted into rope was also found preserved in the peat in “neat knots”.<sup>202</sup>

Collecting stinging nettles can be painful unless one wears gloves to avoid the bicarbonate of ammonia that is injected into your skin through tiny hairs on the leaves and stems. In order to prepare the nettles for rope making it is a good idea to first strip the leaves and hanging flowers from the stems, then “ret” them. I wore my arm length leather welding gloves in order to protect my hands and forearms, although I have seen this work being done bare-handed, using the juice of the nettle as an antidote for its own stings; if you do get stung, you simply squeeze the juice from the stems onto the affected part. Since the time of the Roman invasion of Britain stinging nettles have been used as a method of keeping warm and as a cure for backache by flogging oneself with the nettles on the afflicted area. Herbalist James Duke says that when used in this way the chemicals in the stingers trigger anti-inflammatory chemical into the blood that can help to reduce the pain of sciatica.<sup>203</sup>

Retting is an old process that simply requires soaking the stems in the bathtub for a day, which not only dilutes the remaining poison in the hairy stems, but also softens the

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<sup>202</sup> Coles and Coles 1986, 57

<sup>203</sup> Duke, 384

fibres inside the stems ready for twisting. The stems need to be lightly crushed with a round stone, split and the fibres separated from the pulpy inner material by bending the fibres away; with careful preparation they can be almost as fine as silk, and were used to make cloth during the Second World War. While making rope I found that twisting the fine fiber into thread made a pleasant distraction from the larger pieces of rope.

The fibres can now be rolled on your leg to twist a slender line. Maintaining the twist in the fibres by holding the ends, use your teeth to fold it in half and hold the centre, release the ends, maintaining your grip on the fibres in your teeth. With a little help the fibres will naturally twist on themselves, making the first cord of many that you will need in order to make a sturdy rope.

Once a bundle of pieces of twisted fibres has been accumulated, if a particularly strong rope is required the process of twisting and folding the pieces may be repeated on a larger scale, and a larger gauge of rope created. I spent a pleasant afternoon making three feet of 1" rope, the equivalent of 12' of 1/4" cord.

It would be simpler to go to the local hardware store and purchase some manufactured rope, but I find great satisfaction in making the rope from the nettles that I have found, stripped and peeled myself. The act of making that I have noted earlier as a fundamental practice in the use of stone circles has come into play here in my own work to full extent. I feel an intimate connection to this work to date, which I find to be as "authentic" an experience of making art as any I have had. I also feel an element of shamanism in the practice as I am setting myself outside regular society in making something most people think is unnecessary. The people who appreciate the rope

making approach it with enthusiasm, and a child-like delight, as it reveals a connection to the natural world that was obscure to them.

## **Clay and Pots**

Clay is a fundamental material. To me it is as pure as ashes, but it represents the pure element of earth. Pot sherds are the most frequently encountered material remains found in Neolithic ritual sites, followed by flint flakes. The conventional explanation for all of the pottery is that they were containers for food offerings for the dead, assuming that these structures were merely burial places. This analysis seems increasingly inappropriate. One of the puzzling aspects of the material remains found at cairns is that previously broken sherds appear to have been brought to the sites and scattered. Colin Richards suggests that these pieces are “ritually charged”.

An alternative explanation for the destruction, breaking and scattering of the scorched sherds of pots may be that these are the remains of special treatment of food vessels used in rites of passage, when initiates are required to eat different foods. Pots that were used for ceremonial purposes may have been considered unsuitable for further use, and consequently burned and smashed. If they had been used to prepare a herbal concoction that was to be used as part of the ritual, then even greater the need to prevent re-use, even to the extent that the sherds of the vessel used to make the sacred substance should be scattered, purified by burning and thus become part of the ceremonial, “ritually charged” by their use in preparation for performance. The shattering, burning and separation of pots found at Neolithic ritual sites may be interpreted as a deliberate symbolic scattering of the sherds so that the physical



boundaries of the vessels for making taboo foods are scattered and completely unusable.

I became interested in the incessant appearance of pots in archaeological reports. Potsherds show up in almost every narrative recording life in the Neolithic, making them by far the most ubiquitous artefact represented in the record. I acquired a trashcan full of clay and decided that I would use a repetitive form using it to create an artwork to show. Repetition and destruction are important aspects to the work, which is made of unfired grey clay.



Figure 78. *Grails* about halfway through construction. Photo by the Author.

I have taken the clay and made several hundred thumb bowls (Fig.78), simply created by pushing my thumb into a small amount of the clay and smoothing it about the joint. While one bowl is itself a simple object, the accumulation of many pieces becomes a complex form, with a variety of compositional approaches. I decided to use wax early in the process, while the clay was soaking in water ready to be used. I have previously

noted the appearance of stone cups in Neolithic burial contexts; these clay cups refer both to this ancient tradition and to the Arthurian grail myth. Here the cups are rough made, and emphasize that there is not a “one true grail”, but that there are many individual grails, one for each of us on our individual spiritual journeys.

## **Presentation of the practical work**

Having described the materials and processes of making the works I created as a response to the research it is now time to describe the actual presentation of the works to the public. There have been two principal exhibitions up to the time of writing, the first in Spring of 2005, when I presented an exhibit of work at Westmont College in Santa Barbara.

Works from both shows are shown below with the descriptive texts printed here exactly as it was presented in the exhibit. In order to make clear the difference between writing intended for public consumption and that intended for the thesis I have printed the text that was presented to the public on the walls of the gallery in *italic case*, while additional commentary remains in ordinary case.

## Artefact: An Exhibition of Responsive Sculptures

This show presented my first attempt to make artefacts that are inspired by research into Neolithic British art and architecture. The intention was to make objects that shared the doubt and uncertainty of authentic archaeological artefacts. Some of the objects might have been archaeological finds, hidden away in the storage rooms of museums, lacking a category to place them in.

1. *An Impractical Device For Chiming The Hour (Rock, Rope, Fabric, Hat-Stand, Copper Plated Steel Pipe, Sticks)*
2. *Disused Wig, Slightly Soiled (Horsehair, Beeswax)*
3. *Useless Writing Tablet (Beeswax, Dirt)*
4. *Impossible Astrolabe (Foam, Stucco, String, Sticks)*
5. *Wilted Violet Not Much Good For Medicine (Violet, Beeswax)*
6. *Artefactual Device For Measuring Impracticalities (Clay, String, Sticks)*
7. *Potential Scribing Tool For Ritual Incisions Perhaps (Clay, Beeswax)*
8. *Completely Useless Bell, No Clapper, Fragile (Unfired Clay, Rope)*
9. *\$4.50 Wooden Artefact (Wood, Clay, Beeswax)*
10. *Orcadian Dead (Dolls, Plaster, Beeswax, Cheesecloth, Box, Wild Oats)*
11. *Handheld Ceremonial Artefacts, Obviously (Unfired Clay, Beeswax, String)*
12. *Interpretation of an Archaeological Discovery, Probably (Rock, Plaster, Sticks)*
13. *Mediated Objects Here, Chained and Melting (Steel Bowl, Beeswax, Chain, Wooden Object)*
14. *Perhaps a Timepiece, or Instrument or Ancient Measuring Device (Sticks, String, Steel Balls, Chain)*
15. *The End of the Beginning (Oil Paint, Copper, Wood Panel, Zinc Nails)*

### Displayed Statement:

*“Archaeologists spend their time trying to understand what people did in the past, offering answers to contemporary questions about where we came from and how we got to the present. Objects that are displayed in museums may be mundane, but transformed from their mediocrity to a new status as artefact by virtue of their age, or because of their unique*

*survival, offering a glimpse into the past. These objects are mysterious because we don't know what they are for, and because the act of interpretation is interesting in its own right. Analogy of faith, doubt makes the objects more attractive!*

*The primal act of industry is the transmutation of elements, the drawing of metal from stone. At the heart of civilization we find this transformative quality – elemental transformation is the genesis of innovation, which is a necessity of the cult of the present, where everything must be an improvement on the past.*

*I find two of the materials in this exhibit particularly interesting because they are “in-between”. Wax is a material that is excreted by bees to provide food storage and cells for larvae to grow in: a material of food and birth, not alive, nor a waste product. Hair is equally intermediate, being neither alive nor dead. Because both are liminal materials I think they have a symbolic status that may resonate with participants in this event; their transitional state represents transformation.<sup>204</sup>*

The pieces were displayed in Plexiglas cases, hung on the walls and freestanding in alcoves. A list of the works was attached to the wall with the artist's statement.

### **Mr. Pearce's Cabinet of New Neolithic Wonders**

The second presentation took place in Summer of 2006, when I made a show of work for the Kwan Fong Gallery at California Lutheran University titled *Mr. Pearce's Cabinet of New Neolithic Wonders*. The installed work remained open for the month of August. I showed most of the work shown in the *Artefacts* show and made many new pieces. The larger scale of the second show allowed me to develop my ideas of a ritualised event more fully by incorporating the food, the alignment of the space, and

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<sup>204</sup> Artist's Statement, *Artefacts* exhibit at Porter Hall, Westmont College, Montecito California. Open from Feb 20th 2005 – April 20th 2006.

encouraging physical interaction between visitors and objects, The exhibit was arranged so viewers were required to stretch up to peer into boxes, bend to find objects that were attached to sculptures within small openings. It was my intention to make our visitors sensually, intellectually and ritually engage with the art.

Readers will observe an emphasis on ambiguity in the titling of the works. This was an intentional device to make visitors aware of the positioning of the works within the vesicas of artefact and art object, ancient and modern, creative and scholarly. By introducing ambiguous interpretations where one would normally expect to find definitive commentary I intended to put readers off balance, to create a sense of disorientation that would help to generate a liminal state of mind. In the same vein of thought, the printed material was placed at varying heights on the gallery walls, in some cases quite low to the ground, so that readers had to bend over to read them, encouraging their physical interaction with the exhibit.

# Mr. Pearce's Cabinet Of Neolithic Wonders

Opening reception: Saturday August 5<sup>th</sup> at 3.00 pm.  
Admission is FREE  
Neolithic Bread will be served

SEE Contemporary Neolithic man's waxen grails!  
FEEL the tension of the stinging nettle hung bucket!  
TASTE bread as it was baked in Ancient Orkney!  
WORRY about the desiccated seahorses and the deer's tail!  
ENJOY Contemporary Neolithic oddities and wonders!

Open from August 5<sup>th</sup> – August 28th



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Cutting-edge mixed media work fills the gallery in a combination of Contemporary Art and Neolithic Culture.

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Promotional flyer distributed September 2006.



Figure 79. Disused Wig, Slightly Soiled (*Dimensions vary, Horsehair, Beeswax*) Photo by Bradley Elliot.

*Using a horse's tail, I made this piece (Fig.79) with the missing elements of Neolithic culture in mind. We don't know what people looked like, except through expensive reconstructions of skulls, and we have almost no idea what they wore.*

*Hair is an odd substance, being neither alive nor dead. It represents the crossing of liminal borders. While making this piece I wondered if wigs and masks once were worn by shaven headed shamans in Orkney in the chambered cairns where dog skulls and eagle talons were found as totemic objects.*





Figure 80. Useless Writing Tablet (12" x 24". Beeswax, Dirt) 2004 Photo by Bradley Elliot

*No writing survives from the Neolithic period. The closest we have is a series of scratches found in Orkney that may or may not have been a symbolic text. The druids of the later Celtic period prohibited writing completely in favour of oral tradition, perhaps the same rejection of the written word was prevalent in the Stone Age. The useless writing tablet (Fig.80) mixes two themes: the material is fragile and melts away like the archaeological record; there is no record upon the waxen surface, which has been broken with a blow from a sledgehammer.*

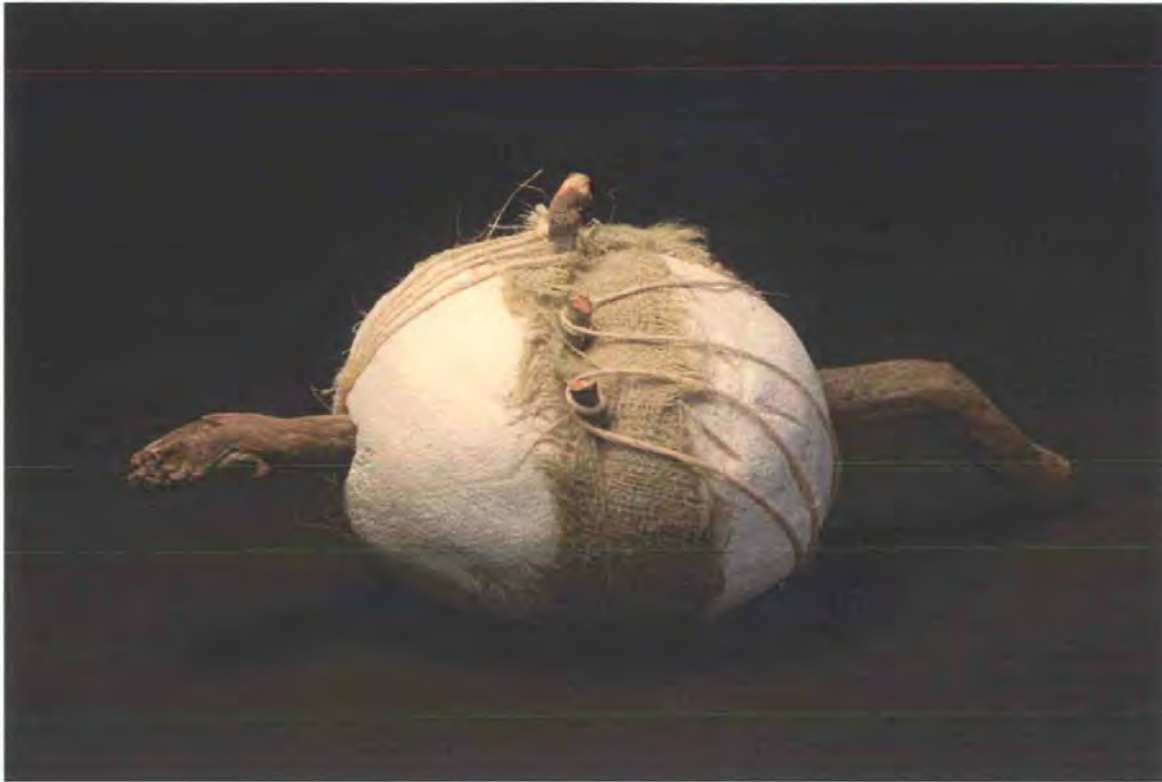


Figure 81. Impossible Astrolabe (8" x 9" x 13", Foam, Stucco, String, Sticks) 2004 Photo by Bradley Elliot

*The emphasis upon archaeo-astronomy in the late Twentieth Century continues to exert a powerful force upon interpretations of Prehistoric Britain. We know that the monumental buildings of the period display deliberate alignments to solar and lunar events, but know almost nothing about the application of the knowledge that astronomer-priests might have gained. Some archaeologists and pre-historians have suggested that the astronomical aspects of the monuments were used to enhance the social power of the people who used them.<sup>205</sup> This piece (Fig.81) is a nod at ancient technologies that may have been, but of which no evidence remains. The monuments imply highly developed skills of astronomical observation, for example, wooden post alignments at Stonehenge that appear to record lunar standstills over a period of "at*

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<sup>205</sup> Ruggles 1999, Castledon 1990, Clarke 1985.

*least a century” with “a genuinely scientific approach”.<sup>206</sup> This level of organization points at a well developed culture of astronomical observation, far from the Victorian assessment of the British people of the Neolithic as barbaric rock pounding savages.*

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<sup>206</sup> Castledon, 1990, 130



Figures 82, 83, 84. Handheld Ceremonial Artefacts, Obviously (*Dimensions Vary, Unfired Clay, Beeswax, String*) 2004 Photos by Bradley Elliot

This assemblage of small artefacts was shown together in a case (Fig. 82, 83, 84). I made all the artefacts with a single purpose in mind; I wanted to try to create objects that looked like they might be Neolithic, and were completely mysterious in their purpose. (No explanations were offered with the pieces, visitors to the exhibit were free to make up their own minds about what they were seeing.)



Figure 85. An Artefactual Device For Measuring Impracticalities 2004 (8" x 5" x 2") Clay, String, Sticks)  
Photo by Bradley Elliot.

*This piece (Fig. 85) succeeds in feeling archaic and completely arcane. It looks as though it could have been a genuine artefact of another civilization, yet is completely alien and mysterious. The materials that were used in its construction lend further character to it, as they are entirely natural and could have been made and used by Neolithic people.*



Figure 86. Potential Scribing Tool For Ritual Incisions Perhaps (1" x 1 ½" x 5", Clay, Beeswax) 2004  
Photo by Bradley Elliot.

*This piece (Fig. 86) is equally successful as the Artefactual Device For Measuring Impracticalities. It has no contemporary analogue but appears to have a purpose, however obscure that is.*



Figure 87. Completely Useless Bell, No Clapper, Fragile (3" x 3" x 3" and 21" rope, Unfired Clay, Rope)  
2004 Photo by Bradley Elliot

*Musicologists can make attempts at reconstructing and playing musical instruments, but we cannot know their tunes; the sound of Neolithic Britain is lost.<sup>207</sup> The Completely Useless Bell, No Clapper, Fragile is both a comment upon the silence of the archaeological record, and the fragility of reconstruction.*

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<sup>207</sup> Purser & O'Dywer, *The Kilmartin Sessions*. This wonderful reconstruction of music spanning prehistory includes a brave attempt to capture the sounds of Neolithic whistles and percussion.



Figure 88. \$4.50 Wooden Artefact (10" x 5" diameter, Wood, Clay, Beeswax) 2004 Photo by Bradley Elliot

*This piece crosses the boundaries of contemporary and Neolithic art. The phallic shape refers directly to the chalk phalli of Wiltshire burials, the wax and chalk decoration emphasizes the fragility of decorative practices that are mostly lost to us.*





Figure 89. Interpretation of an Archaeological Discovery, Probably (14" x 14" x 6", Rock, Plaster, Sticks)  
2004 Photo by Bradley Elliot

*A fairly successful attempt to reinvent Neolithic art, the piece (Fig. 89) has an enjoyable ecological quality. The sticks appear to grow from the stone, the plaster seems to be protecting the stone and the sticks, binding them together. The organic fibres meet the rock in the pure white of the plaster. We associate plaster with medicine and the healing of broken bones. Hopefully the work inspires the healing of the earth.*



Figure 90, 91. Orcadian Dead I (14" x 16" x 22", Dolls, Plaster, Beeswax, Cheesecloth, Box, Wild Oats) 2004, 2006 Photos by Bradley Elliot, Mark Tevis.

*The traces of objects found by archaeologists are enticing reminders of the people who once used them. This, the first of a series of Orcadian Dead pieces, acts as a memorial to our ancestors who made and used megalithic structures and earthen circles.*

*They are hidden from us.*



Figure 92. Wilted Violet Not Much Good For Medicine (*destroyed, Violet, Beeswax*) 2004 Photo by Bradley Elliot

*Neolithic peoples' only recourse to treating illness was to exploit things that grew in, or were part of, the natural environment. Plants provided a huge range of medicines, and minerals contributed some help. Contemporary medicine has distilled and controlled the dosage of effective compounds; chemists can simulate compounds that relieve the symptoms of illness. Both have profound effects on our life spans, but the everyday knowledge of natural medicines has been lost in the process. Herbs were certainly used in the Neolithic. Almost miraculous survivals of organic matter found in archaeological exploration have revealed Meadowsweet, Henbane, and Belladonna upon potsherds.*



Figure 93. Mediated Objects Here, Chained and Melting (*Dimensions vary, Steel Bowl, Beeswax, Chain, Wooden Object*) 2004 Photo by Bradley Elliott.

*The conflict between natural and mechanical worlds is explored in a gesture toward the enslavement of the environment.*

*I used wax and a medical stainless steel bowl to make this piece, one of the works leaning toward the more contemporary end of the duality of contemporary and prehistoric tendencies. The natural beeswax shrank away from the cold steel and is chained to a wooden machine turned object.*

*Is all progress a good thing when it sweeps away much that has been good in the past?*

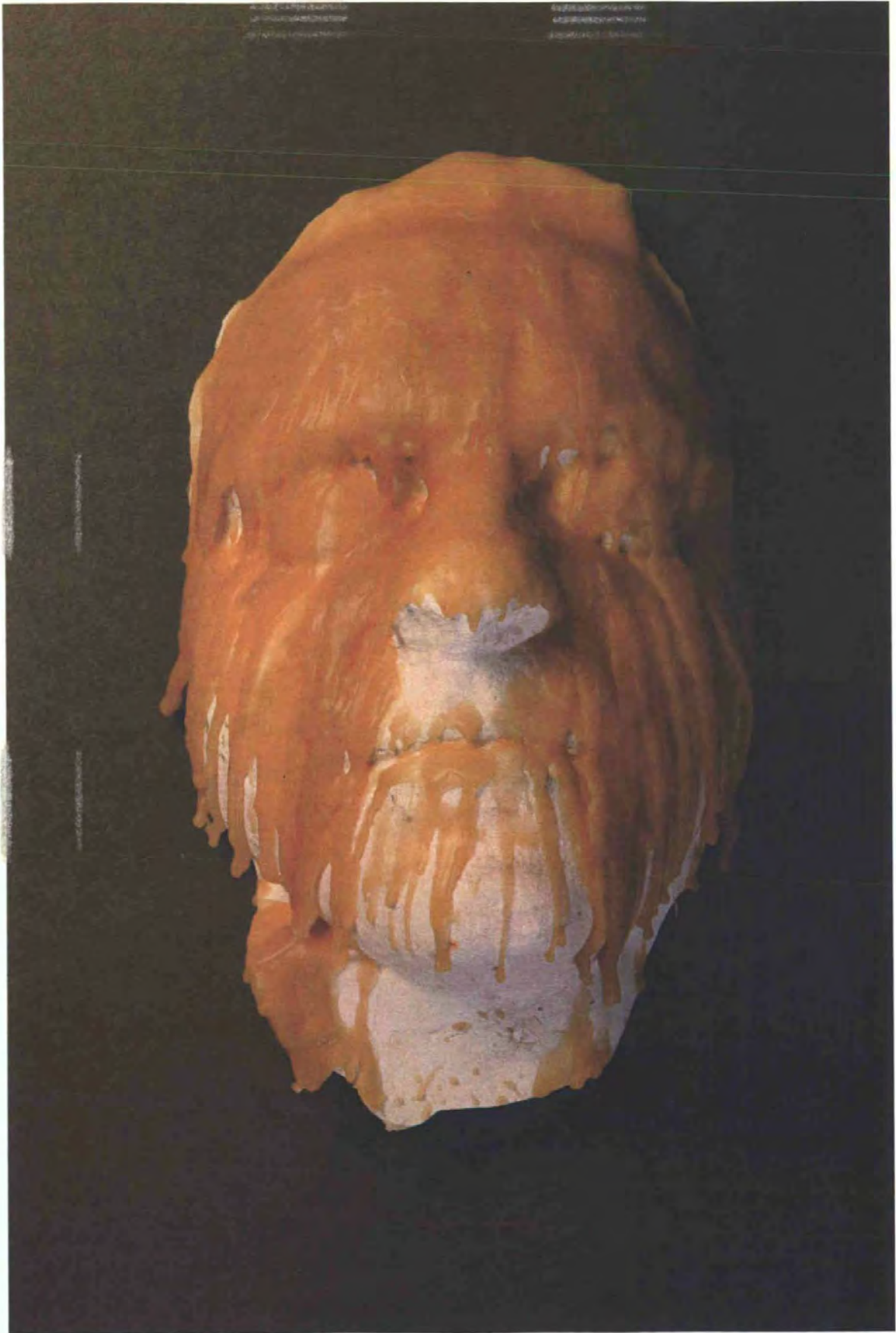


Figure 94. Orcadian Dead II. (9" x 6" x 4", Plaster, Wax) 2004 Photo by Bradley Elliot

*The piece (Fig. 94) required a long process of casting, making the mould, creating the positive image, heating wax in a double boiler then carefully dripping it onto the plaster. The piece represents my desire to make work that places me as maker in continuity with the people of the Neolithic.*

*The absence of the personalities of the Neolithic, whose mortal remains are sometimes seen only as slight stains in the earth, and the powerful impression left by the narrative of their lives in the archaeological record, surviving in conditions that contemporary people would find impossibly difficult to endure, inspires me to understand their search for meaning in natural objects. I want my creative practice to be like theirs, to make it an organic, important part of my daily life.*



Figure 95. Perhaps a Timepiece, or Instrument or Ancient Measuring Device (28" x 38" x 27", Sticks, String, Steel Balls, Chain) 2004 Photo by Bradley Elliot

*This piece (Fig. 95) is an early effort at exploring the dialogue between the natural and industrial worlds, using steel and wood to emphasize the contrast between harmony and exploitation. The sphere seems to have been important to Neolithic people, but the organic half-sphere mounds of stone and earth have little in common with the cold metal of the perfect spheres made in the factory. The steel spheres here replace the Neolithic imaginary sphere with the cold perfection of the age of metal. To my pleasure the steel is beginning to rust. I feel vengeful.*



Figure 96. Orcadian Dead III (59" x 8" x 15", Dolls, Plaster, Beeswax, Sackcloth, Pine and Poplar Boxes, Alloy brackets) 2006 Photo by Mark Tevis

*Among the many Neolithic practices that seem alien to us is the re-use of the remains of the dead. After being left outside for the beasts of the field and the birds of the air to strip to bone, the skeletal remains of the ancestors were stacked in piles in artificial caves built to house them, then rearranged and used in ceremonies in which they were scorched in fires, then replaced in the chambers of the mounds.*





Figure 97. *Orcadian Dead III* in the process of being made. Photo by Mark Tevis

*Orcadian Dead III* (Fig. 96) captured the spirit of the placement of the dead in chambered cairns and barrow mounds by creating small wrapped dolls that were dipped in wax. I wanted to make use of a symbolic process, rather than exhuming real bones, (although I did have a series of strange conversations with our butcher about how to cook pigs heads and what tool to use to scrape out their brains) so I created a ritual for preparing the dolls for their use. The dolls had their hair cut off, were wrapped in hemp fibre cloth, which was tied tightly around them. The wrapped dolls were placed in individual boxes and encased in a layer of plaster, then stacked vertically in a gesture toward the Neolithic practices of placing the bones of the ancestors together in the cairns. The dolls cannot be seen clearly unless viewed from close beside the piece, requiring the position of the viewer's body to be altered as the person participates in the piece. While subtle, this movement of the body adds to the sense of participation in the ritual of the show.



Figure 98. Installing *Orcadian Dead II*. (*Orcadian Dead III* is immediately behind me) Photo by Mark Tevis

*Orcadian Dead II* emphasizes the offerings made in the cairns by developing the relationship between completely encased dolls and wild oats, which are the most ancient of food grains known in archaeology.

Neolithic ritual spaces took enormous labour to build, were used to confirm the approval of the ancestors and functioned astronomically to re-affirm seasonal change and could very well have served to support the power of the ruling hierarchy under whose control time, the ancestors and landscape appeared to be. Power lies in the use of initiatory practice, and we can imagine ritual leaders using their knowledge of the light-show spectacles of rudimentary astronomy to secure their importance in the community. Obviously we cannot observe the ancient rituals that would have been done at these times, but the physical remains are clear evidence of the separation of ordinary outdoor space from transitory sacred space within stone built mounds. Within

*the enclosures lie evidence that suggests ritual use of skeletal remains,<sup>208</sup> possible animal totemism<sup>209</sup> (N.B. the suspension of the deer tail of the Phallus piece in the Cabinet, and the two Snake Box pieces) and rites of passage involving the closing of tunnels from within<sup>210</sup>.*

I included the photograph of myself installing the Orcadian Dead piece as a way of introducing myself into the exhibit although I would not be present after the reception. I suspect that all too often we forget the people who spend a lot of time and work to produce the art objects that we admire. Because the process of making was important to Neolithic Britons, it became important to me. I want people to be aware of the physical creation of the objects.

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<sup>208</sup> Burl 1997, Hedges 1978.

<sup>209</sup> Ritchie & Ritchie 1978, Hedges 1978.

<sup>210</sup> Davidson & Henshall, 1989.



Figure 99. An Impractical Device For Chiming The Hour (*destroyed, Rock, Rope, Fabric, Hat-Stand, Copper Plated Steel Pipe, Sticks*) 2004 Photo by Bradley Elliott

*This piece (Fig. 99) owes more to Duchamp and his found objects than many of the other works. The hat stand is particularly reminiscent of his Bottle Rack.*

*I was interested in the transition between the Bronze Age and the Neolithic period, and how the introduction of metal impacted what had become a deeply traditional stone based society.*

*The passing and measurement of time seems particularly important to Neolithic Britons. Their domestic and sacred buildings are aligned to the rising or setting sun, with particular attention to detail at major ceremonial centres. But the Neolithic measure of time is over a broad scale, while the introduction of metal, particularly in the Iron Age, brought with it newfangled inventions like water clocks, dividing the day into hours.*

I used found objects in several pieces. They served both as a reference to the artefacts from the past recovered in archaeological digs and as an acknowledgement of the objects displayed in the cabinets of curiosity that had inspired me in my search for display method that would be appropriate to my work.



Figures 100, 101. Two years of entropy's work upon *The End of the Beginning I* (48" x 48", Oil Paint, Copper, Wood Panel, Zinc Nails) 2003 Photo by Bradley Elliott, then in 2006 Photo by Ernst F. Tonsing

*This flat work (Fig.100, 101) explores the arrival of metal in the human experience, and confines a painted image of a pale and fragile moth within a copper casing, attached to the panel with crude cast zinc nails. The piece relies on the reductive process of illusionist painting to make the image work, whereas more recent work uses a more direct image making process by casting living and dead objects in plaster. I'm enjoying the gradual changes caused by entropy the piece is going through over the course of time.*



Figure 102. *Rock Paper Scissors* (66" x 72", Rock, Printed paper, Plastic bags, String, Scissors) 2006

The following text was attached to the gallery wall, with the actual stones described in it pinned in plastic bags, and accompanied by the photographs seen below framed in simple black. With the exception of the stones and the scissors, most of the piece is included in the thesis! (*Fig. 102*)

*Rock Paper Scissors* took my unspoken invitation to interact with the works beyond the present into participation in future artworks. Scissors hung beside strips of paper that invited people to call my office telephone number and leave a wish on the message recorder. In Los Angeles we often see posters with strips that are easily removed attached to neighbourhood lamp-posts, inviting people to an event or invitation. People who wish participate in the event offered on the poster simply tear off a strip and use it when they return to their homes. These wishes will be used to make a work called *Other People's Wishes* in a future show.

Having the opportunity to help create new work deepens the involvement of the gallery visitor as an initiate of the *Cabinet* and enhances my role as shamanic helper in their efforts to manifest their hopes.

I have received fifteen wishes at the time of writing.

The seven texts (*in italics*) with the accompanying scanned stones follow:



Stone 1:



Figure 103. *Pebble from Stenness – Rock, Paper, Scissors Suite 2006* Scanned by the author

Text 1:

*I began making Rock, Paper, Scissors in February of 2006 after I caught a flu virus that was to force me to rest for a few days. I got home from work on the first day of the illness and went straight to bed, falling into a half-awake fevered dream state. I dreamed of a gallery in which seven pictures of small stones hung in a circle. This image nagged at me for the rest of the evening until I finally gave in to it, got out my sketchbook and started drawing pebbles to see what the technique of drawing enlarged stones might be like and to get to know the technical difficulties of such a project on a smaller scale before committing to the actual work. As I worked the project changed and became a more word-based work, playing on the children's "Rock, Paper, Scissors" game and the nature of the study of megaliths. The wish component comes from the old tradition of good luck coming from the practice of making offerings to the ancient stones.*

*For several years I had I been collecting rocks from places that had spiritual, emotional or megalithic significance to me, taking care not to remove any structural elements from prehistoric sites. At the Stones of Stenness in Orkney I found a pebble that had been used by archaeologist Colin Richards to fill the ancient hearth at the centre of the circle. Stenness is slightly to the Northeast of the centre of Mainland Orkney, and is a World Heritage Site due to the spectacular preservation of its Neolithic landscape. Five thousand years ago at this beautiful place, between two lochs, a thirty feet deep ditch was cut in a circle through bedrock, and the earth and debris cast up into a mound ringing the outside of the ditch. Flat, twenty-foot high slabs were erected in a circle within the enclosed area.*



Figure 104. *Stenness, Orkney at midsummer solstice. Photo by the Author*

*The megalithic circle stands at the end of a natural peninsular lying on a bearing of 320° / 140°, right on the axis of Orkney's midsummer sunset and midwinter sunrise, which seems likely to be one of the reasons that the Barnhouse complex was built on this unique piece of land. Almost but not quite meeting the Stenness side is an opposite peninsular upon which stands the later Ring of Brodgar. In the centre of the Stenness circle is a square of four recumbent stones in a setting very similar to the hearth found in the ritual building at Barnhouse, also aligned to 320° / 140° and confirming the significance of the alignment. Across the bridge at the Comet Stone setting close to the Ring of Brodgar the settings of three of the four stones that once stood there are also arranged on this alignment. Carbon dating shows that the Neolithic buildings at Barnhouse were settled between 3400 and 2900 BC, while Stenness circle was built later, between 3100 and 2600<sup>211</sup> which suggests the new circle replaced or augmented the use of the ritual structure at Barnhouse. The circle is in the centre of a roughly*

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<sup>211</sup> Ashmore 1998

*East/West alignment from inside Onston chambered cairn looking out from the entrance passage to Stenness, and beyond the circle to Maes Howe, the greatest of the chambered mounds on Orkney, which is seen from Stenness through a “gun-sight” arrangement of two stones beside a table-like flat slab.*



Figure 105. *The “gun sight” at Stenness, Maes Howe is visible as a small green bump in the distance. Photo by the Author.*

*The Barnhouse stone lies at 140° (at the alignment for midwinter solstice sunrise) and is also at the centre of an alignment with the entrance of Maes Howe at midwinter solstice sunset. Three aligned arrangements were visible at the site in June 2003:*

*Maes Howe passage – Barnhouse stone - Winter Solstice Sunset*

*Summer Solstice Sunset – Stenness - Barnhouse stone – Winter Solstice Sunrise*

*Onston passage – Stenness – Maes Howe*

*Seven stones from seven places. Common themes: water, islands, holes, circles, liminal places.*

Stone 2:



Figure 106. *Flint from Hackpen Hill – Rock, Paper, Scissors Suite 2006 Scanned by the author*

Text 2:

*On the Ridgeway, close to Hackpen Hill, where the antiquarian White Horse looks over the landscape and the windswept trees howl like freight trains, I found bulbous flint nodules that to the Wessex people of Prehistory must have been like gold lying on the ground. Walking there in March 2006 I hoped to discover an arrowhead, and wandered through the fields looking for knapped stones, no arrowheads appeared but the lumpen flint nodules are very satisfying; I like the “squeezed out” feeling that the stone has, as if it was toothpaste forced through the gaps in the chalk. The Ridgeway has an extraordinary power over my experience of the Wessex landscape. The landscapes of my childhood all lie upon it, including Smeath’s Ridge, Barbury Castle, Weyland’s Smithy, and Avebury. The path it traces through the land has been walked for seven thousand years.*



Figure 107. *I picked up flints here in ploughed fields beside the Ridgeway, not far from Hackpen Hill.  
Photo by the Author*

*Flint is used to make fire*

*Knapped flint has an incredibly sharp edge*

*The Ridgeway has been in use for seven and a half thousand years*

*The flint nodules are often phallic*

*When we're in charge we will teach them better manners, cover them all in diapers.*



Stone 3:



Figure 108. *Andy's Slate from Dumfries – Rock, Paper, Scissors Suite 2006*  
Scanned by the author

Text 3:

*I dreamed of an installation of eight drawings of stones arranged in a circle. When I told Andy Goldsworthy of my dream of eight stones in one piece he said that I should take a piece of stone from beside one of his pieces; I found some broken and burned slate in a dew covered grassy campfire nearby his Slate Stack and brought it with me to California. Slate Stack is a rectangular structure of stacked thin stones with a vertical circle arranged in the centre.*

*A stone from a circle and a square*

*A stone from fire and water*

*A stone from Dumfries, Scotland*

Stone 4:



Figure 109. *Pebble from Holy Wood, Dumfries – Rock, Paper, Scissors Suite 2006 Scanned by the*

*author*

Text 4:

*At the Twelve Apostles stone circle in Dumfries I found a piece of the road metalling that lay in a puddle next to an outlying stone with a wildly inaccurate information plate glued to its surface, leading me to reflect on the abandoned quality of this circle. The twelve apostles site is next to the recently excavated site of the Holy Wood cursus, where Julian Thomas discovered a conical ash pile with a potsherd balanced on top, a piece recreated as Ash Cone in a contemporary setting in the Mr. Pearce's Cabinet show in August 2006.*

*A stone from a stone circle*

*A stone from water*

Stone 5:

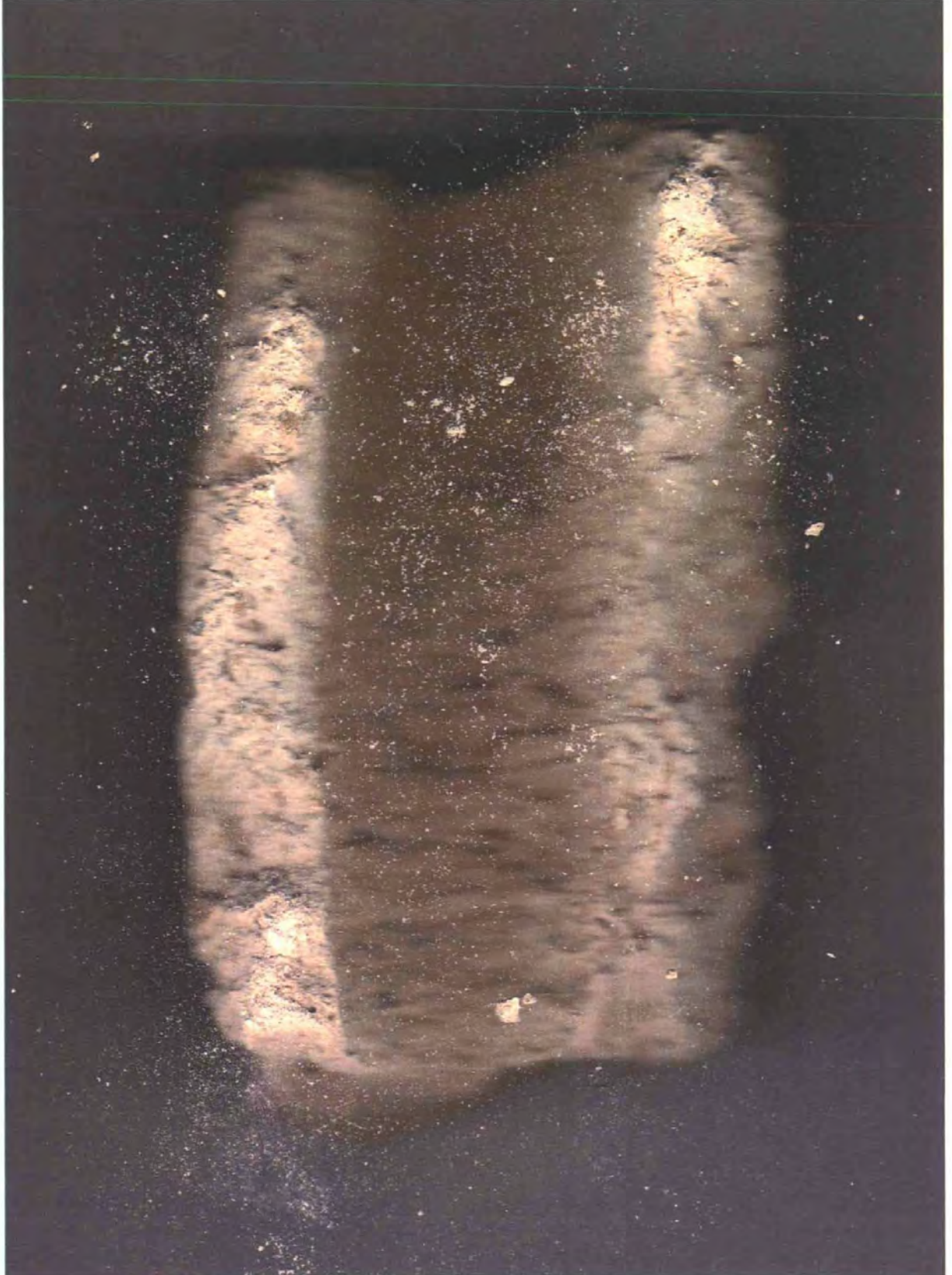


Figure 110. *Concrete tube from Avebury – Rock, Paper, Scissors Suite 2006*  
Scanned by the author

Text 5:

*At Avebury I found a broken half cylinder of concrete that had obscurely made its way into the Southern circle, beside the stone row aligned to the South.*

*A half circle of stone from a stone circle.*

I see no need for the things I show to appear to be old, nor do they need to be in good condition or valuable. Artefacts of the past become interesting because they are old and can be interpreted to give us insight into the past. I am offering meanings and interpretations of objects that might otherwise appear to be worthless.

Stone 6:



Figure 111. *Drilled Concrete – Rock, Paper, Scissors Suite 2006 Scanned by the author*



Text 6:

*The concrete disc came from my next-door-neighbour's garden. He had had some drainage work done, requiring putting a pipe through a wall, so the plumber drilled it out with a heavy duty masonry drill. The disc of stone remaining after the process reminded me again of Men an Tol in Cornwall, and I wondered about the destroyed ring stones at Avebury and Stenness.*

*I enjoy the contrast between this prosaic piece of industrial debris and the naturally made holed pebble from Butterfly beach.*

*If you look through an industrially made circle of stone, do you see industrial faery folk?*

*A circular stone from the hilltop*

*Stone cut from stone to make a water channel*

Stone 7:

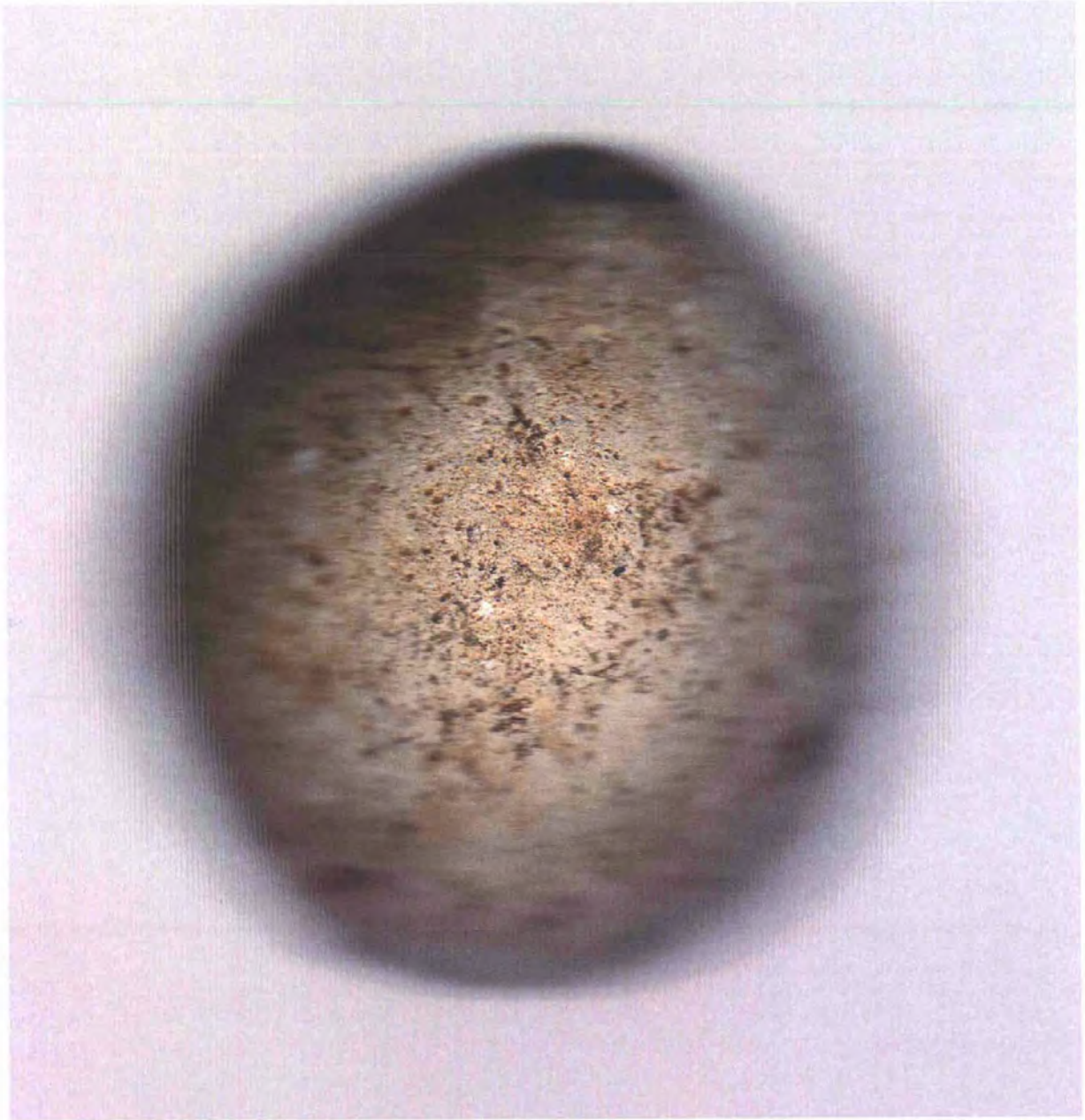


Figure 112. *Ellendune Chalk Ball – Rock, Paper, Scissors Suite 2006 Scanned by the author*

Text 7:

*Chalk sling stone from the battlefield of Ellendune, fought by Alfred the Great against the Viking invaders. My son found this at the demolished site of the old convent beside the stream in Snapp's close, where my brother and I used to play at boats when we were kids, following them down the stream until they tumbled into the waterfall beside the white washed cottages. Here there be monsters; here in my memories there are always stinging nettles concealing mythical beasts dwelling beneath the slab bridge. We threw coins into the pools to make wishes. The coins were swept away by the current, made their way downstream until the stream became a river.*

*I wonder if the chalk ball is in fact as recent as the Battle of Ellendune, or if it dates back to the Neolithic when chalk balls were placed in barrow mounds. There is no way to accurately date the stone that totally lacks context, so this will remain a mystery. Perhaps a bored schoolboy made the ball just last year.*

This probably is a genuine archaeological artefact, but it is almost inscrutable because it lacks context. Nevertheless, it is a worthwhile object in romantic terms as it inspires story-telling and wonder.

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Figure 113. Face box  
(94" x 12" x 9" Pine  
planks, Plaster, cast  
human faces) 2006

Again working with the theme of absence, I made a box of pine planks, filled with plaster and then pushed previously cast plaster faces of individuals into it, plenty of Vaseline to ensure the release of the mould. the moulds are pulled, the remaining cavities are negative images in plaster of the true faces (Fig. 113). concerned with the loss of the people who made ancient Britain. They exist only in traces of what they and did; nothing remains of their living hopes and relationships. Sometimes archaeologists can recognise human remains only by stains left in the find this somewhat shocking. Although the existential statements made by the builders of the mounds succeeded in memorialising the culture of the period, have failed to contain the personal narrative of the people who built them.



Figure 114. Snake Box I (24" x 12", Plaster cast of Snake corpse) 2006

*I built a wooden box 2' x 1' x 1' from pine planks. The gardeners at the park on the edge of the National Forest gave me a dead snake that I coiled into a spiral so that it would fit into the box, then poured plaster half way up the body. I wanted to connect my work with the absence of the people whom I have become so involved in, who are sometimes commemorated only by stains in the ground, all traces of them had been destroyed by the forces of entropy, so the box was left in my friend Mark Tevis' garden and the snake devoured by insects (Mark has no children or pets to interfere with the decomposition and I thought the process would be pretty disgusting). The piece is clearly connected to the questions raised by absence in archaeological practice – ceci n'est pas un serpent -*

*but it is the space occupied by the snake's body. Because the piece was so revoltingly smelly (and a hazard to good health), I made a second cast of it, seen here as a positive image (Fig. 114).*

*The snake is known as a symbol of natural cunning.*

*The spiral was used as decoration in a multitude of Neolithic chambers and appears in carvings upon standing stones and flat rock art throughout megalithic Europe. In the British Isles it famously appears in triple form in the chambers of cairns on Orkney, and in the huge Boyne Valley monuments in Ireland.*

(I am presently developing a new piece based on Snake Box I and the original cast of the decomposed snake. Fabricated in bronze, it will include the two pieces facing each other in a wooden frame attached sideways to a wall. Viewers will be able to see into the gap between the facing bronze casts. At the time of writing one half has been cast.)



Figure 115, 116. Snake Box II (6" x 8" x 12", Pine, Poplar, Wood ash, Plaster, Snake corpse) 2006  
Photos by the Author

*Some of the earliest rock art is found pecked into slabs that lie face down over cremated remains within stone cists in grass-covered mounds. The spiral often features in these carvings, clearly placed for the benefit of the dead, not the living.*



Figure 117. Grails (*dimensions vary, approx. 30" x 36" x 40", Recycled clay, wax*) 2006 Photo by Ernst F. Tonsing. Figure 118. Grails (*detail, Recycled clay, wax*) Photo by the author.

*Three hundred very crude cups were made from recycled clay then filled with beeswax that was melted in a double boiler. The filled cups were arranged in a conical pile (Fig. 117). The piece references the Neolithic practice of incorporating stone cups into cairns. Wax is a particularly attractive natural material; it negotiates an elemental change from liquid to solid, smells great, melts and changes colour as it cools, and is made by insects that transform plant matter into wax by digesting and regurgitating it. Hot wax hurts a little when it splashes onto skin; this is appropriate to the shamanic nature of the work.*

*I want to feel that I have earned the objects, either from physical tiredness, or from the experience of creating. I am not a masochist, and immensely dislike pain, but have noticed that in the course of nearly two decades of creative practice my work always has cost me blood or pain in some way; my hands are scarred from years of injuries sustained in the making of art. I see this as part of the sacrificial nature of the work.*





Figure 119, 120. Summer Cross August 5<sup>th</sup> 2006 (60" x 288" x 288", Telephone poles) 2006 Photos by Ernst F. Tonsing

*The Summer Cross piece (Fig. 119, 120) was placed outside the gallery and completed at sunset. My fantastic assistant, Mark Tevis, and I chain-sawed telephone poles into sections, then arranged them into the aligned cross of midsummer and midwinter.*

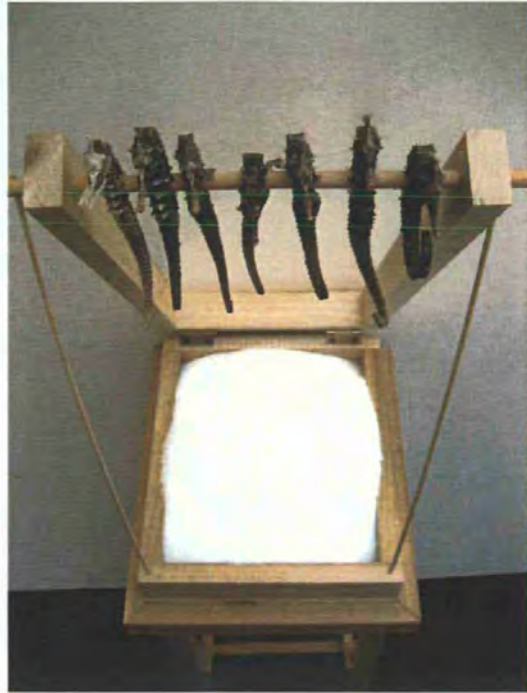


Figure 121, 122. Seahorse Totem (50" x 10" x 12", Poplar frame, Pine dowel, Seahorses, Hemp string, Salt) 2006 Photos by Ernst F. Tonsing

*The dried seahorses are suspended above the ground, pierced by a dowel. They are in the opposite environment to their natural place floating freely in seawater. The salt replaces the water, while the seahorses are desiccated and dead. They serve as a symbol of the damage to the earth. In Orkney totemic animal remains were found in several of the Neolithic chambered cairns found all over the islands. I became interested in using the hermaphroditic seahorses as a totemic creature for this show. Like seahorses, shamans are often sexually ambivalent, so here they may stand for a shamanic spirit of energy. The seahorse piece is therefore multi-layered, having both an ecological and mystical role to play.*



Figure 123. Hole in Bucket (240" x 18" x 18", Stinging Nettle rope, 2 Alloy buckets, Water, Holed Rocks)  
2006

*I made rope from stinging nettle fibre, and then used it to suspend a bucket above head height so that its contents could only be seen when standing on a step. (Fig. 123) I wanted to capture a sense of mystery and a shared secret in the piece. The bucket came from a local hardware store. The rocks are from Butterfly Beach in Montecito, California. I drove seventy miles to the location, walked to the place where I knew I would find the stones, removed my shirt and carried as many as I could without dropping them back to the car. The tide was coming in; I had to hurry. My choices were dictated by a simple criterion, the stones in the top bucket had to be fully pierced, the stones in the bottom had to be incompletely penetrated.*



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Figure 124. Totem I (5" x 2", Deer tail, 72" hemp string) 2006

*phallic totem is a dried deer's tail. It hangs from a cord from hemp. I used it in the piece because I want the exhibit to be a virile healing experience for people who visit. I have suspended it among the first objects clockwise from the entrance to the gallery so that it will bring fortune to the installation. Its companion piece hangs the wall directly opposite.*



Figure 125. Totem II (6" diameter Steel donut, 72" hemp string) 2006

*Totem II is the female equivalent to the deer tail opposite. Men an Tol in Cornwall works in the same way, consisting of two vertical megaliths in line with a circular stone.*

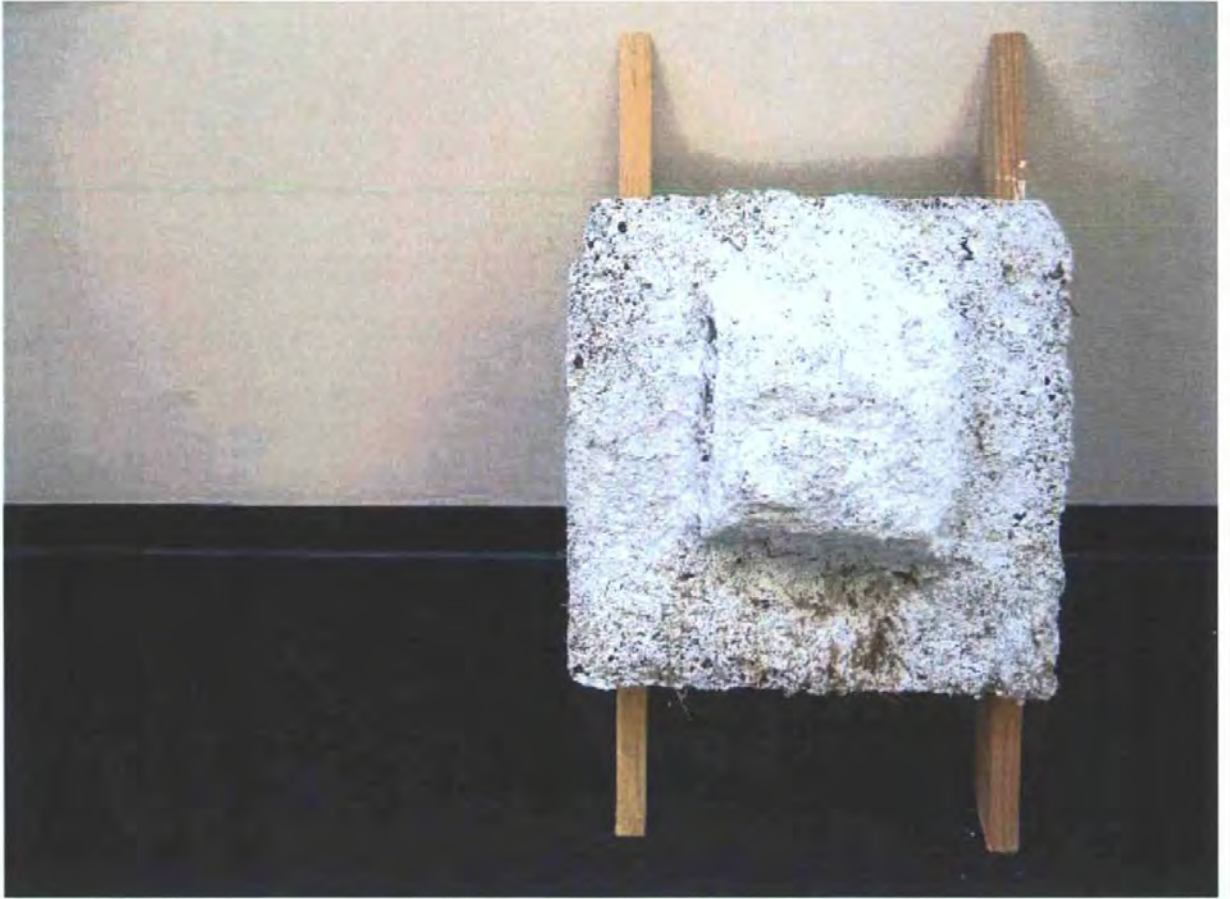


Figure 126. Well (36" x 24", plaster cast of a hole) 2006

*Well (Fig. 126) refers directly to the archaeological practice of digging and removing the earth. It is the record of an empty space, or the containment of space.*

*Absences are the spaces that we fill with conjecture.*



Figure 127. Donut (72 " diameter, Gravel, 72" String, Stone) 2006 Photo by Ernst F. Tonsing

*Whether in the form of megalithic arrangements or earthworks, the practice of making circles on the earth was extremely important to Neolithic Britons. The motif was also used extensively in the creation of rock art panels, which Donut (Fig. 127) is particularly inspired by.*

*Archaeologists have come up with a variety of theories to explain this phenomenon, including the famous, but largely discredited archaeo-astronomical notions of Dawkins,*

*Thom and Atkinson. Donut is an exploration of the dynamics of making geometric shapes from very simple tools, and brings a vertical element into the circular space with the simple plumb line, and extends the rock art theme of the penetrated circle into a third dimension.*

*I am very interested in parallels between our time and the distant past, and amused by puns. The title here is a cheeky cross-reference to the donut image I enlarged and placed on the doorway to the exhibit. As people enter the door they symbolically pass through a hole, albeit a donut hole, into the liminal space of the gallery.*





Figure 128. Arthur's Box of Light Rocks, Dark Rocks (72" x 24" x 12", Pine planks, Copper wire, Rocks)  
2006 Photo by the Author

*Given enough time, exposure to the light transforms stone.*

*The acidity of the earth has an effect on everything, either preserving or utterly destroying objects left within it for a few millennia. These are powerful forces.*

*When copper was first wrested from the rock it introduced an exploitative relationship that was to transform human existence. When King Arthur pulls the sword from the stone, does he represent the first blacksmith, introducing metal weapons to his people?*



Figure 129. Mudfaces (24" x 12", Plaster cast of clay imprint, String) 2006 Photo by Ernst F. Tonsing

*My face was cast in plaster, the positive image pushed into a pine box full of recycled clay slurry and allowed to dry in the hot sun. More plaster was poured into the split negative, creating Mudfaces (Fig. 129).*

*The piece refers to the failure of archaeologists to restore life to the people of the Neolithic who have left us mysteries to solve, but no personalities.*

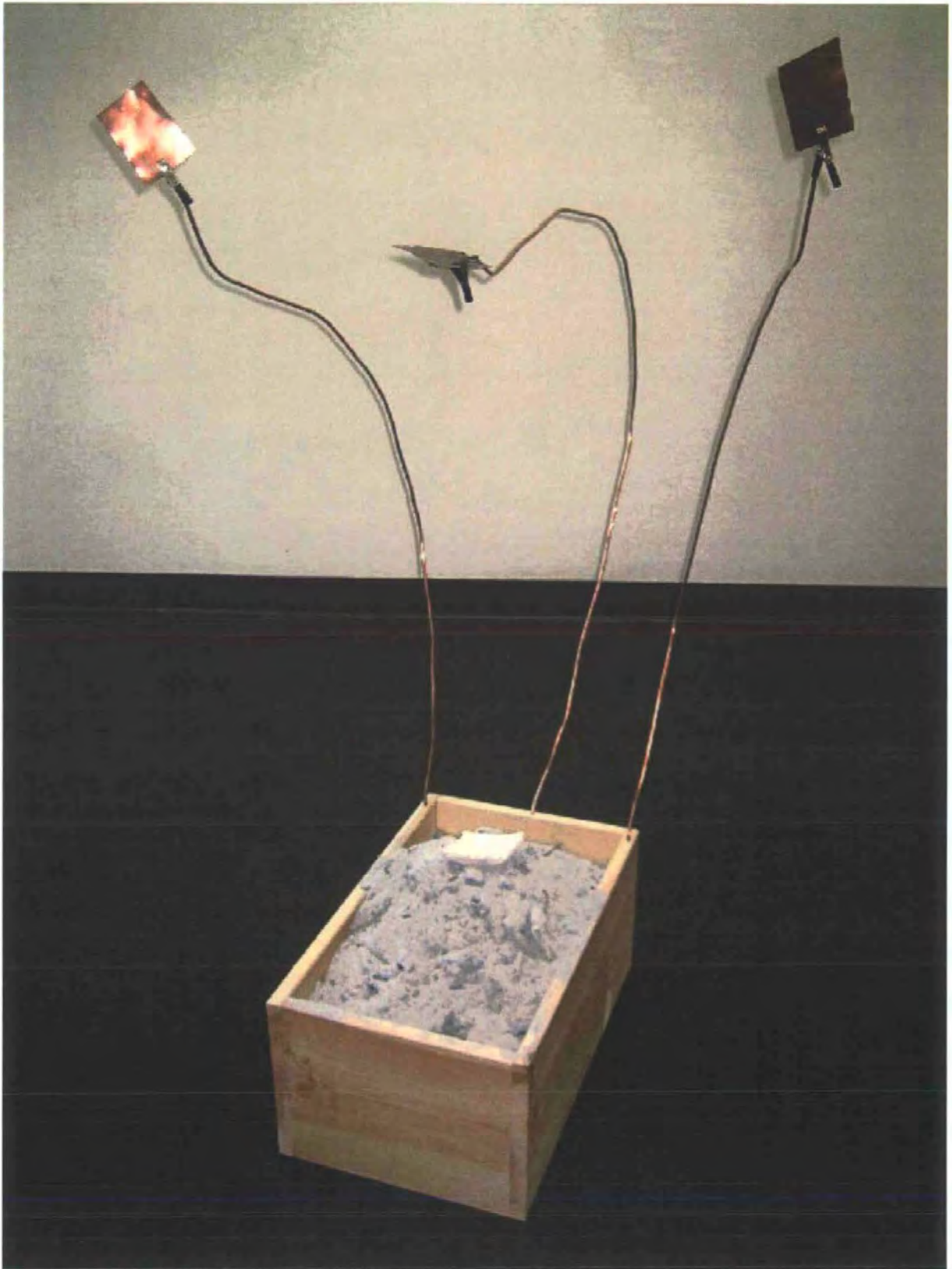


Figure 130. Ash Cone (12" x 24" Pine Box, Wood Ash, Bone, Ceramic Potsherd, 60" Copper Wire, Crocodile clips, Copper sheet) 2006 Photo by Ernst F. Tonsing

*Ash Cone (Fig. 130) is a reinvention of a discovery by archaeologist Dr. Julian Thomas, who reported the excavation of a cremation at Dunragit while speaking at the Art in the Land – Ritual, Polemic, Speculation Conference at the Glasgow University School of Art, Dumfries in 2006. His excavation gives an unusual glimpse into the memorial practice of Neolithic people: careful digging revealed a pit with a conical mound of sand covered with charcoal and ashes from a cremation, including human bone, that had been topped with a piece of pottery that was already ancient when it was re-used in this way. His discovery is a poetic link between the ancient past and the present, showing the humanity of our ancestors in the simple empathic gesture of honouring their ancestors.*

*There are bones in the present piece.*

*The copper plates suspended upon copper wire appear to bow over the ashes, offering a more charitable connection between the metal ages and the Neolithic than other pieces in the show. Here the emphasis is upon the continuity of ideas through generations.*

*The plates appear to be for written commentary, but where we hope for information we find none. Pre-Roman Britain was an a-literate society; druidic law in the Iron Age proscribed writing.*

## **Following the Neolithic path.**

The present Cabinet is a beginning. As a collection of works it will grow as it travels to different locations and I am able to add to it; I don't see it as a closed body of work, but like the makers of the great stone circles of the distant North, intend to continue making it as a way of keeping in harmony with the universe. It has a similar purpose to Wadham's circle in that I do not intend to sell the works, but to offer pleasure and perhaps some understanding of the continuity between the ancient past and the present. The successful reception of the exhibit in Summer 2006 made me optimistic for the future of this group of work, and I am now so immersed in the production of work founded in the Neolithic Cosmogony that I will continue producing works to add to the show for many years.

Present works in development include a large version of a Snake Box that will be cast in concrete and mounted into a wall, a bronze version of *Snake Box II*, and several painted works based on holed stones that I am naming Wishing Stones. I have made four to date, one of which has sold to a private collector in California. I have found a semi-permanent home for the solar cross at a Counselling Centre, where people visiting the quiet garden space will enjoy the sculpture, hopefully finding in themselves the universal centring that the piece offers.

Indeed, all the work is intended to demonstrate an expression of the harmony of mankind within the natural world and include an appreciation of the idealistic and respectful cosmogony of Prehistoric Britons. In future I hope to include visitors to the work in a ritualized setting, allowing them to be initiated into the work in order to communicate some understanding of our ancestors to contemporary people and use

the tools available to contemporary artists to do it. The liminal space is therefore arranged in imitation of and in harmony with the Neolithic models: the axis of the space is noted in terms of solar alignment, and the space is approached by passing a solar symbol expressed in impressive terms using telephone poles, then entered by passing through a hole that gives access to a larger inner sanctuary. Within the liminal space individual works are based on Neolithic ideas of decoration and arrangement, with practices of display that seem most appropriate to the uneasy relationship of the gallery as a presentational space and the landscape contexts of the Neolithic works.

Alongside the prosaic materials used to make the work I use simple food and drink made from ingredients available in prehistoric Britain as part of the participatory rite of passage to include a communal participation in the work, nodding to the ritual practices revealed by archaeologists. I expect this aspect of the work to grow and expect to find more ritual context appearing in the way I create the pieces, for example inviting participants to create their own grail and fill them with wax while inserting a slip of paper containing whatever thoughts they wish to leave behind them. I see these ritual performances as a healing creative process that can help people both to find healing and to connect them with their ancestors. The people invited will be a private group selected because of their affinity to the work, initiates into it. These ideas will be tested in Summer of 2008 as we take the Cabinet to a variety of art galleries in Southern California.

The process of researching and making the work led me down some unexpected paths. In my efforts to produce work that was in harmony with the ideas and culture of Neolithic Britain I found that it is impossible to understand fully what happened in the

past, because the picture we create can only be informed by interpreting the objects and buildings that have survived. We can only *attempt* to understand the past, and we will never succeed in truly deciphering prehistory because, as L. P. Hartley observed, the past is a foreign country. Because these things can only inform us about the small corner of their culture that they occupied (i.e. ritual art and architecture) it is ultimately impossible to get a fully rounded idea of what it may have been like to participate in the ritual life of these people, so all we can do is make informed guesses. It is for this reason that the discipline of archaeology continues to change and flux as time passes. There is no right answer, but a multitude of versions of the truth that all might apply.

For me, as a contemporary artist dealing with the interpretation of the past, this ambiguity became fertile food for the creation of works; many of the pieces in the *Cabinet* deal with flexibility of interpretation. The exciting contrasts offered by an academic study with a creative output led me to question my work's authenticity. I have said before that in the context of my work the word "authentic" refers to the success of my efforts to be rooted in and respond to the Neolithic period, and I believe that the *Cabinet* successfully captures the essence, if not of the absolute reality of the Neolithic British period, at least of what *I know* of the Neolithic British period after intensive research.

I had not intended to become involved in Neolithic religion as much as I did, as I began this work with the intention of understanding and using Neolithic British rock art design principles in my own work, a study which expanded and transformed into this work. In the course of creating the *Cabinet* I became strongly aware of my desire for a romanticised world in which art and religious practice are intertwined. Prior to doing this

research I had not been comfortable with the idea that religion and art could co-exist in my practice, but the *Cabinet* can clearly be seen as an initiatory religious experience. It invites people to be transformed by their participation in the work and to learn about the underlying principles of Neolithic cosmogony, offering an alternative way of thinking about the universe. I did not anticipate involving myself in incorporating shamanic practice into my art, thinking that understanding the period would be done by calm observation and logical deconstruction. Instead I concluded that I was more than an observer, and wanted to “channel” the practices of our ancestors.

The idea of contemporary work responding to the Neolithic implies a return to the past, like the cyclical nature of time understood in Dharmic religions as the wheel of life, so it is fitting to return to the beginning as this dissertation reaches its end: the people of the British Neolithic were preoccupied with circles and used them repeatedly as motifs in their sacred spaces and decorative arts. Indeed, time has been the undercurrent of my creative practice as a result of, and as an inspiration to, my research into the Neolithic. Time shapes our interpretation of the past and our understanding of the present and simultaneously creates the circumstances that preserve and destroy culture. We lose our memory of the past alarmingly quickly, and history is revised to suit the needs of the present generation. Academic archaeology tends toward empirical interpretations of the past, but time is on the side of the artist; “*time is on my side*”, because time is entropy, eroding facts and making space for my approach to the distant past to be one of speculation and creative interpretation. These works cannot be a reconstruction of the distant past, but are a re-interpretation of it.



So, in the end, although it is tempting to close with the words of Mick Jagger, Malraux's observation stands to begin and end this particular cycle:

*It is not that we prefer time-worn bas-reliefs, or rusted statuettes as such, nor is it the vestiges of death that grip us in them, but those of life. Mutilation is the scar left by the struggle with Time, and a reminder of it— Time which is as much a part of ancient works of art as the material they are made of, and thrusts up through the fissures, from a dark underworld, where all is at once chaos and determinism.<sup>212</sup>*

Michael Pearce, Los Angeles, February 2006.

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<sup>212</sup> Malraux, 1951, 635

## Appendix 1. Genetic Britain

Text by Bob Burns:

"I have used the method of genetic distance vectors (as described in the book '*Reflections of Our Past*' - *How Human History is Revealed in our Genes*', by John H. Relethford) to carry out a basic calculation of the relative percentages of both Indigenous Britons and Continental invaders for the various survey test sites. I cannot claim that the method I used is as accurate as the more sophisticated techniques used by the UCL researchers, but the results do seem to correlate well with the few percentages, which have been quoted by the UCL team. For instance, they quoted indigenous percentages ranging from 50% to 75% in the South of England and 70% Continental invaders for York. They also stated that whereas most of Wales was solidly Indigenous (Celtic), Llanidloes showed an unusually high percentage of Anglo Saxons/Danes. Therefore I have concluded that the method I used cannot be that far out. Here are the results of the calculations:-

### Wales:-

Haverfordwest	95% Ind	5% G/D
Llangefni	100% Ind	0% G/D
Llanidloes	55% Ind	45% G/D

### Scotland:-

Shetland	55% Ind	45% N
Orkney	55% Ind	45% N
Western Isles	55% Ind	45% G/D & N
Durness	75% Ind	25% G/D & N
Stonehaven	75% Ind	25% G/D
Pitlochry	85% Ind	15% G/D
Oban	95% Ind	5% N & G/D

### North and East England:-

York	30% Ind	70% G/D
Norfolk	40% Ind	60% G/D
Morpeth	70% Ind	30% G/D
Southwell	55% Ind	45% G/D
Uttoxeter	65% Ind	35% G/D
Penrith	60% Ind	40% N & G/D

### South and West England:-

Chippenham	50% Ind	50% G/D
Faversham	75% Ind	25% G/D
Midhurst	75% Ind	25% G/D
Dorchester	70% Ind	30% G/D

Cornwall            75% Ind   25% G/D

Ireland:-

Rush                90% Ind   10% N

Isle of Man        65% Ind   35% N & G/D

Channel Islands   55% Ind   45% G/D

NB. Ind = Indigenous Britons

G/D = German/Danish (Anglo-Saxons/Danish Vikings)

N    = Norwegian (Norwegian Vikings)

(As the method of calculation is fairly basic, the percentages are rounded to the nearest 5%, as any greater precision would not be justified.)<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Personal email, 2005.

## **Appendix 2. Nostalgia and the Neo-Pagan Revival**

The contemporary use of ancient spaces beneath the colours of Neo-pagan revivalism challenges our understanding of the creative principles that were used to make sacred space in the Neolithic. The conflict over the preservation of Seahenge neatly illustrates the extraordinary claims of ownership of ancient sites periodically made by Neo-pagan groups. Seahenge is a circle of wooden posts arranged around a central inverted tree that has been buried so that the upside-down root bole makes an odd branched platform. A single forked branch in the surrounding palisade allows entrance. Neo-pagan protesters there tried to prevent the ancient wooden structure from being preserved, claiming that their view that it should be eroded by the sea until destroyed should be adhered to because they were the cultural inheritors of the site. The structure was removed to be treated and now may be seen at Flag Fen.

Atavistic relationships between national peoples and their landscapes are unmeasurable in scientific terms, but nonetheless present in their cultures. Patriotism is a manifestation of the relationship of a people to their land; an abstract concept of “homeland”, or “fatherland” felt by a population that shares common cultural interests and goals. The current reactionary post-modern increase of interest in paganism illustrates the desire of a growing portion of the British population to share in the belief systems of ancient ancestors who are idealistically observed by the various groups that hope to recreate their religious beliefs. The landscape of the Neolithic is viewed by Neo-pagans as the utopian landscape of the people of Britain, who are viewed as British ancestors, British blood.

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