

# DEFORMED SURFACES UNCOVERING SOMERSET LANDSCAPES

JESSE ALEXANDER

**10 SEP - 10 OCT 2025**

Millfield, Street, Somerset BA16 0YD



Still from 'Deformed Surfaces' from *The Digging Season* (2023)

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General Installation View

## FURR Statement

*DeFormed Surfaces* was a substantial solo exhibition realised in collaboration with the Atkinson Gallery, a public gallery within Millfield School in Street, Somerset. The gallery offered generous, high specification space as well as printing, graphic design, promotion, installation and invigilation. It drew together around five bodies of work with specific connections to Somerset made since 2006. Most of the works had been exhibited previously but this was the first time they had been seen together as an expression of my research interests in the representation of place and rural environments.

Although predominantly photographic, the exhibition also included video, drawing, found objects, and a timeline spanning and referencing themes and events within the exhibition. A reading table also provided an opportunity for visitors to learn about specific historical and ecological contexts around the works, as well as contemporary art photography more broadly, and also displayed other book projects of my own. (The table itself also made reference to the archaeological theme within *The Digging Season*.)

The proximity of a high specification exhibition space in such close proximity to the site of my current research into the Somerset Level wetlands was particularly exciting, enabling audiences with close personal and family connections to many of these places to reflect on their experiences within a gallery context. For visitors from further afield, it was an opportunity to raise awareness of the social and ecological complexities of peat extraction that continues despite its adverse impact upon the climate.

The exhibition was launched with an 'in conversation' event with Dr. Tom Baugh (Dean of the Faculty of Art and Communication at Falmouth University, who worked previously at Strode College in Steet) which was attended by 202 people. 853 people visited the exhibition during the month it was open.

Jesse Alexander



# DEFORMED SURFACES

## JESSE ALEXANDER

Jesse Alexander has been preoccupied with the land and being outside since childhood, whether playing wargames in fields as a boy, trapping after his grandmother on her farm, or walking through woods and lanes. This lifelong relationship with rural environments has evolved into a sustained, critical photographic practice spanning over two decades. *Deformed Surfaces* brings together a body of work rooted in the complex representation of the land, one that is both personally reflective and grounded, particularly in the Somerset countryside.

Emotionally invested in both town and country, Jesse's photography repeatedly engages with the visual languages, tropes, and clichés of rural Britain, sometimes embracing them, more often than not interrogating them. His work challenges the conventions of pastoral imagery. It exposes the contradictions inherent in how we aestheticise or commodify "the countryside" by turning a critical lens on these familiar forms, Jesse invites viewers to consider the distance between surface appearance and lived experience.

Time, as both subject and methodology, lies at the core of this practice. In contrast to photography's traditional role in freezing a moment, Jesse's approach slows time down. Projects emerge gradually over the years through repeated work, accumulated observations, and learning. In works such as *Threshold Zone*, time is not merely recorded but manipulated and stretched, subverting expectations of the photographic medium. The Somerset Levels and Moors are part of a seemingly "young" landscape, where time is not marked by trees but by the slow accumulation of peat, layer by layer, not romanticised but carefully observed. What results is an evocative visual language where presence and memory intertwine.

Throughout Jesse's work, a tone of quiet sobriety prevails, an atmosphere that often borders on melancholy. His images resist spectacle and embrace stillness. The weathered textures of the land, its forgotten corners and awkward juxtapositions are quietly celebrated. A subtle irony threads its way through many of these photographs, manifesting in incongruity or even surrealism: a collapsed farm forming a view like a stage set or the startling geometry of rocks carved by heavy machinery through soft folds. These moments unsettle the familiar and suggest deeper narratives at play.

Jesse's work offers a way to experience the land on multiple levels, visually, emotionally, and physically. Fields, hedgerows, and stonehills are not just subjects but also sites of transition and transformation. His images capture the traces of both human presence and absence, navigating the blurred lines between natural processes and cultural interventions.

In this way, Jesse Alexander's work offers more than visual documentation; it constitutes a form of inquiry into place, perception, memory, and meaning. *Deformed Surfaces* is not simply a collection of landscapes but a topographic exploration of what it means to look, to return, and to know a place honestly.

Jennifer Turnbull  
Director of the Alderman Gallery

Installation View:

Director's introductory text  
*Threshold Zone* (2008)  
*Rückenfiguren* (2006)



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Jennifer Turnbull  
Director of the Atkinson Gallery





*Rückenfiguren*  
(2006)

Giclée Print  
70 × 70 cm



On an assignment, scouting possible locations across Bristol for a potential reality TV show, I found myself at fairly downbeat shopping arcade around Whitchurch, which is at the very south of Bristol. I didn't really know the area, apart from the road through Withywood, up the winding road to Dundry that I had travelled on hundreds of times going to and from my grandparents' home in the Chew Valley. I remember being struck by a narrow country road that extended from this suburban arcade, somewhat incongruously, very steeply up the east side of Dundry Hill. Usually there is some transition – some 'edgeland' – bridging town and countryside, but I was conscious of how abrupt the threshold was here.

I followed my curiosity, and this road, not much more than a track, wrecked tarmac crumbling at the edges. Potholes were filled with rubbish; there was fly tipping at every passing-place and gateway. Then I drew up to this one where two farmers were burning rubbish, and I took this picture. It immediately expressed, in an image, tensions that I felt between the urban and rural, but couldn't really put into words. It instantly took me back to Casper David Friedrich's *Wander Above a Sea of Fog*, romanticism and the sublime. The figure gazing into a landscape – a 'Rückenfigur' like Friedrich's – is a ubiquitous motif in visual culture, deployed as a tactic to immerse the viewer within the view, commonly used in advertising.

Travelling to and from Bristol via Dundry always transports me back to those childhood journeys, conflicting feelings and mixed emotions about the town and the country.



*Threshold Zone*  
(2006 – 2008)

Three Lightboxes with Duratrans prints  
61 × 70 cm





Although caves and the underground are culturally synonymous with the realm of beasts and where bad things can happen, they have also long functioned as sites of initiation as well as provided shelter and sanctuary. *Threshold Zone* explores this dichotomy by placing the viewer in the space between the entrances to underground spaces (referred to as the 'light zone'), and where the space enters a state of perpetual darkness – the 'dark zone'. As well as documenting sites of past industry, heritage and culture, the works attempt to inspire universal images of mythology, fantasy and science fiction.

Using a large-format camera with only available light to illuminate the subject, some locations required exposure times as long as one week to render the final image. The resulting pieces explore photography's intrinsic relationship with time, disrupting the notion of photography's ability to freeze movement and moments. The long exposure felt like a fitting method to apply to such spaces, where time elapses at a different pace to the world above.

These are among a suite of five lightboxes presented as the resolution of my MFA studies, and were fabricated especially for installation at Redcliffe Caves in Bristol, which have a rich history and mythology of their own.



*The Silent Land*  
(2017 - 2021)

Monograph

Framed Gicl  print, 62 x 53 cm

Framed unique cyanotype  
(‘Remember’ by Christina Rossetti), 10 x 15 cm

Eight framed C-type prints, 25 x 20 cm

‘Coming to Light’ text by Jacky Borwing, 112 x 66 cm



*The Silent Land* observes, over several years, the Forestry Commission plantation at Stockhill Wood near Priddy in the Mendips, close to where I was living at the time. 'Priddy Wood', as I knew it by, remains intimately connected to my own childhood, as somewhere I was taken to regularly by my family, and I take my children there now.

Although not especially setting out to do so, I ended up recording the phenology of the forest, revisiting it regularly. I wouldn't always take pictures: revisiting spaces, discovering new parts of the forest, recalling memories. Being surprised or disorienting myself became as important as the exposures that sometimes remained in the camera, unprocessed for months. The photographs of this, roughly, square-mile of woodland very much began to resemble to my own mindset throughout the period.



Jacky  
Comin

Wildlife and  
recreational  
use of the  
site, and  
the way  
the site  
has been  
managed  
over the  
years. The  
site is a  
woodland  
and is  
managed  
as such.  
The site  
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Ecologically speaking, Stockhill Wood is unremarkable, although it bears all kinds of contradictions that are typical of so many landscapes: the forest resembles what we would causally describe as 'nature' or 'natural', yet it is mostly fastidiously managed for timber and is an important destination for leisure. It could arguably be described as an industrial landscape – it is certainly a 'post-industrial landscape': the trees grow on the site of prehistoric lead works – the remains of much more recent works are still present a just stone's throw from the wood, and features in *Threshold Zone*. The route of a Roman road also passes through the wood. The woods hold many stories and personal experiences. Whilst there are specific health benefits to being in places like these, they can be imbued with pathos and melancholy.

The *Silent Land* was published by VIKI in 2021. The text 'Coming to Light' was written in response to the series by Jacky Bowring, Professor of Landscape Architecture at Lincoln University in New Zealand and author of *A Field Guide to Melancholy*.

*The Silent Land* is included in the recent publication *What Makes a Photobook Sustainable?* by The Sustainable Photobook Publishing Network, and has featured in their touring exhibition and shown at several UK photo festivals as well as in Lodz and Toronto.



*Elementary Husbandry*  
(2013 – 2016)

Five C-type prints, 99 x 74 cm

Milking stool (c.1920)



Popular narratives of the spaces beyond our towns and cities as places of sanctuary and escape are sources of great personal intrigue and underpin the concerns and motivations behind *Elementary Husbandry*. This project began after I relocated from Bristol to North Somerset. Over time, my fairly opportunistic photographs began to encompass both my personal reflections on my immediate surroundings and my developing understanding of landscape representation. It was during this period that I wrote my landscape 'primer' *Perspectives on Place* and making these photographs was a welcomed foil to the more academic, screen-intensive process of drafting a textbook.

The series draws upon two founding pieces of Western literature: Hesiod's *Works and Days* (c.700 BCE) and Virgil's *Georgics* (c.40 BCE) which explore rustic themes and use rural settings to frame multifaceted narratives. These works examine a range of fundamental concerns, such as Man's ancestry, war and peace, sexuality and so on. The poems exemplify the 'pastoral' – best defined by literary critic and poet William Empson as "the process of putting the complex into the simple". These ancient texts, taking the form of a farmer's almanac, conflated practical advice for farming alongside instructions for leading a modest and virtuous existence. They are widely accepted as the prototypes for the pastoral motifs that have since become ubiquitous within depictions of the agrarian landscape.

*Elementary Husbandry* was exhibited at Bank Street Arts in Sheffield in 2016 and coincided with a residency that resulted in *The Nymph and the Shepherd*.







*The Nymph and the Shepherd*  
(2016 – 2017)

Forty-eight Giclé prints, 30 x 21 cm

Two Giclé prints, 84 x 60 cm

‘The Passionate Shepherd to his Love’,  
by Christopher Marlowe, 21 x 30 cm

‘The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd’  
By Sir Walter Raleigh, 21 x 30 cm

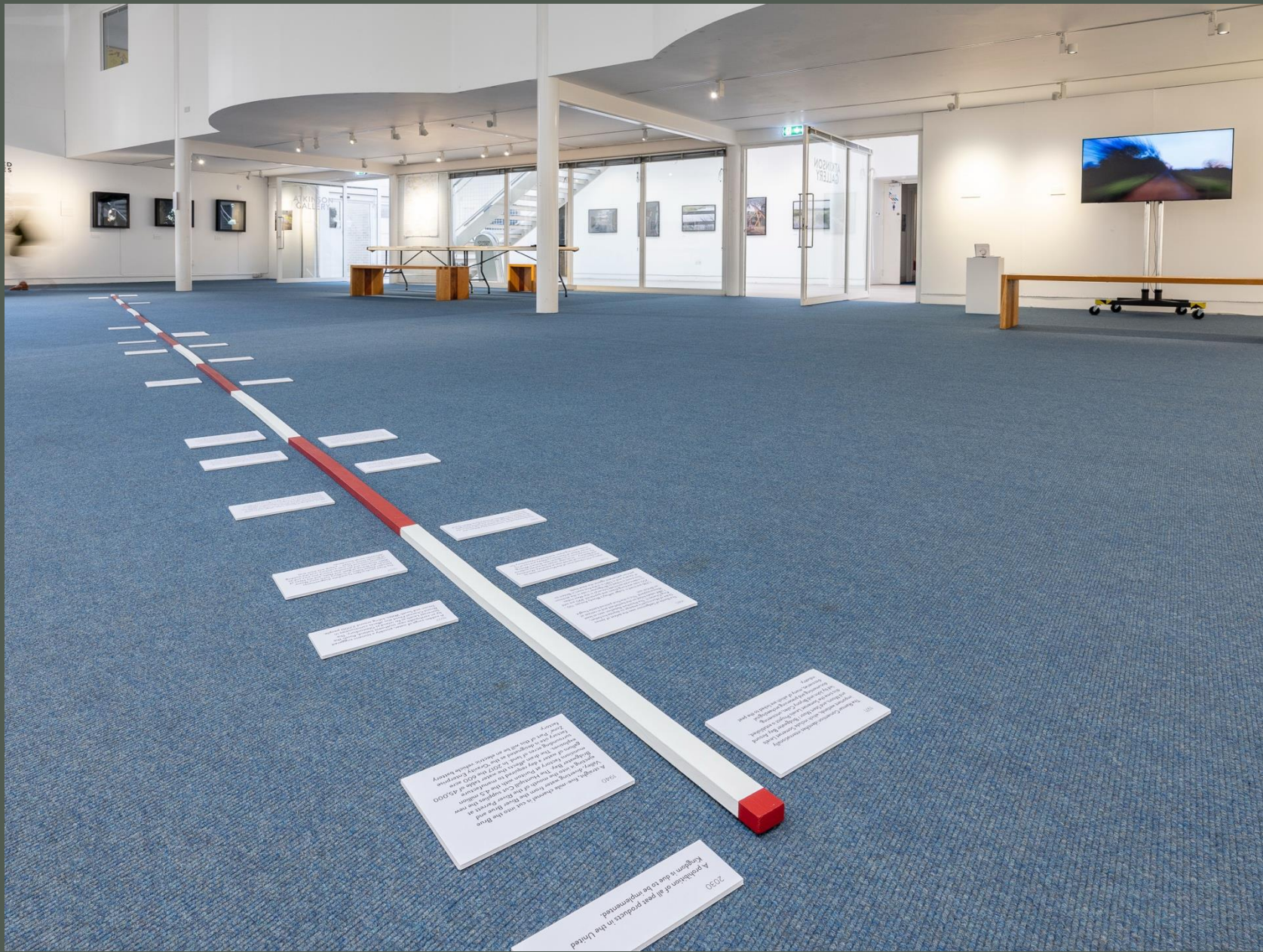
Coinciding with the exhibition of *Elementary Husbandry*, this residency with Bank Street Arts in Sheffield extended my inquiry into the pastoral. Over the course of a year I would send a new photograph each week, which was printed and displayed in the gallery. Preoccupied with how pastoral imagery is often intertwined with romantic (amorous) narratives and tropes, I imagined the collaboration as a correspondence between lovers, casting myself as the ‘passionate shepherd’ and the gallery as the adored ‘nymph’.

Key to conceptualizing this project was the discovery of two late Elizabethan poems, ‘The Passionate Shepherd to His Love’ by Christopher Marlowe written in 1599, and ‘The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd’, written in response by Sir Walter Raleigh the following year. These were composed at a time when European expeditions to the ‘New World’, with tales of exotic, Arcadian landscapes, excited the popular imagination and wistfulness for a long-lost Golden Age. Aping the exact structure of Marlowe’s stanzas, Raleigh’s nymph provides a line-by-line rebuttal of the ardent romantic idealism expressed by Marlowe’s shepherd.

Rather than with love poems saturated with idealised images of nature, I attempted to woo and seduce the object of my desire with documentary realism – topographic images faithfully rendering how I encountered the land over the year.







1:1  
(2025)

Painted wood batten and mounted paper  
12.3 meters



This timeline represents the geological epoch known as the Holocene. The scale is 1mm: 1 year – roughly how long it takes for peat to form. Scientists are in broad agreement that the Earth is in a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene, in which human activity has been permanently impressed upon the planet's geology and has irreversibly altered the climate.

The point at which the Anthropocene began is debated: some argue that it can be pinpointed to the Industrial Revolution, while others specify the 1940s, and the effects of nuclear testing. Some, such as the palaeoclimatologist Professor William Ruddiman have asserted an 'early Anthropocene hypothesis', arguing that human activity since the end of the last ice age – predominantly agriculture – began impacting ecosystems as early as 8,000 years ago. Peatlands started growing at this time across the northern hemisphere and will have mitigated at least some of the effects of Stone Age populations and deforestation.

As well as a precious carbon store, peat is a 'palaeoenvironmental archive', recording details of organisms and climatic conditions at specific points in time, and provides evidence to support our understanding of the prehistoric environment. But the presence of man-made objects within peatlands, amalgamating with contemporaneous organic material, seems to be overlooked within assertions of the early Anthropocene hypothesis.





*The Digging Season*  
(2023)

Five Gicl  prints, 106 x 76 cm

Three Gicl  prints, 50 x 50 cm

Found marine clay

Four unique pen and ink drawings, 29 x 42 cm

Framed found postcard  
(‘The Peat Gatherers’) (Anon.)

Video (‘Deformed Surfaces’) (11 minutes)

Essay / poster



Peat has been mined in Somerset since the Roman occupation, and thereafter successive authorities have been determined to drain, shore-up, and otherwise 'improve' what is England's largest wetland. Healthy bogs can sequester carbon on colossal scales, but when they dry out, stored carbon decomposes and bogs become net producers of greenhouse gasses, having a severe impact on climate change. The desiccation of the Somerset Levels and Moors has released millions of tons of CO<sub>2</sub> that has built up over the past seven thousand years or so.



(Left to right)

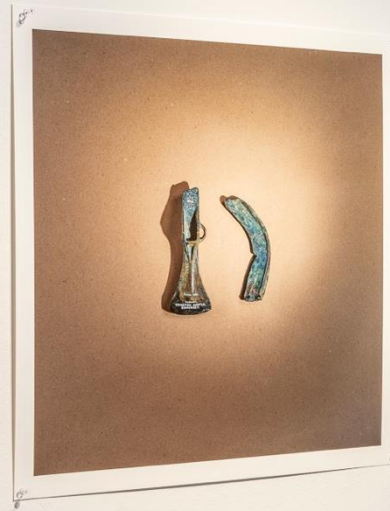
Roman flagon, c.224 CE

Bronze Age palstave and sickle, 1400~1200 BCE

Neolithic carinated pot, c.3800 BCE



Roman flagon, Shipwreck Heath, c.224 CE



Source: *See caption and text.* Copyright

In 1924 a hoard of 18 female skeletons, paleontologists believe, were found in a cave with ancient tools during prospecting in the Shuanglun Shilin area. They were found in a cluster of around 10 metres, in a small chamber less than a metre deep. The skeleton was unearthed. The Shuanglun cave site is around 1500 - 1600 BC. It is believed that the site is a prehistoric site of the Shuanglun cave site, in the Shuanglun cave site.



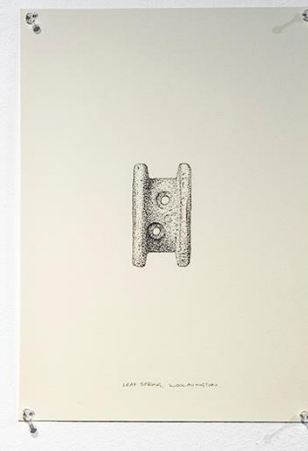
© 2000 Blackwell Science Ltd

[illegible]

Yet whilst peat has gradually accumulated on the raised bogs of the Levels, the anaerobic conditions have secured a wealth of artefacts that are archaeologically unique and provide an understanding of ancient cultures that we would otherwise be ignorant of. *The Digging Season* links topographic photographs of the final throes of the peat mining industry in Somerset with still lives of artefacts that were discovered in the process of peat cutting.



Illustrations of contemporary objects collected during excursions into the Levels allude towards future possibilities for this place and encourages new narratives to unfold. These are inspired by line drawings made in the 1970s and '80s by the Somerset Levels Project who were responsible for much of the archaeological fieldwork on the Levels.





The video, 'Deformed Surfaces', records the experience of travelling through a typical part of this landscape: a road that is unusually straight due to the absence of features to contour around, and undulating almost comically – undermined by aggressive drainage to extract peat from even greater depths.

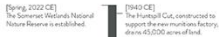
First shown at Photo|Frome in 2023, the installation included 'Raising a Bog' – a 'show bog' made in collaboration with Jenny Hyden – approximating a healthy raised bog, as would have covered much of the Levels, had they remained untouched.

[see:

<https://www.jessealexander.co.uk/thediggingseason>]

The project has been made possible thanks to the support of the South West Heritage Trust who generously granted access to their collections and assisted with research. *The Digging Season* is part of an ongoing exploration of the Levels, and the intersections of history, industry and ecology.





The Huntspill Cut, constructed to support the new munitions factory, drains 45,000 acres of land.

(1538 CE)  
The Dissolution of the Monasteries leads to the destruction of sacred sites at Achelney, Muchelney

Abbot of Glastonbury Abbey and two monks are hung, drawn and quartered on Glastonbury Tor.

Alfred, King of Wessex takes refuge and fortifies the island known as Athelney. From here he wages a counter-offensive against

strategic victory at Edington in Wiltshire. Alfred continues his plan to unite the kingdoms of England and will become known as 'Alfred the Great'.

[c. 100 CE]  
 Roman occupiers begin  
 earthworks to drain the Brue  
 Valley, construct sea defences

The period of global warming that began in c. 1500 BCE ends c. 700 BCE. Sea levels rise and freshwater wetlands are overcome

sedges and reed swamps again. Trackways are improved with sturdier timbers and dugout canoes are prevalent.

A woman is buried in sand at Greylake. The site is uncovered in 1933 and remains that are

is the first non-cave Mesolithic cemetery in the UK and changes understanding of how human remains were treated during this period.

[3000 BCE]  
The Walton Heath track is laid,

consistent with trackways built across the Levels from this time until c. 400 BCE. This technique extends to the present-day craft

existed for 5,000 years.

[Spring, 3806 BCE]  
Neolithic farmers begin work on  
a raised track across marshland

Sweet whilst clearing a drainage ditch in 1970 and named after him. At the time of discovery, the track is the earliest constructed road

discovered over the next decade.



to manufacture high-explosives. The inevitable drainage that resulted from digging the Huntspill Cut affected the water table across 45,000 surrounding acres, allowing year-round agriculture on improved land, 6000 acres of which flooded regularly.

[illegible]

the past more than a century, profoundly modified the topography of the Blue Valley and its associated human community, yet in this case created opportunities for new habitats and ecosystems. Educated post-war citizens, the middle class, moved into the area, and the landscape was transformed from a rural landscape of small farms and woods into a suburban landscape of new subdivisions. The area's wetlands, which had been transformed from natural grass ponds and were almost immediately refilled by the construction of a drainage system, were replaced by a new landscape. The area's wetlands, which had been around since around 1800–1900 years ago, the new open fields of the area and the landscape's green network of roads and waterways were replaced by a new landscape of suburban development. The area's wetlands, which had been around since around 1800–1900 years ago, the new open fields of the area and the landscape's green network of roads and waterways were replaced by a new landscape of suburban development. The area's wetlands, which had been around since around 1800–1900 years ago, the new open fields of the area and the landscape's green network of roads and waterways were replaced by a new landscape of suburban development.

Conservation and restoration of wetlands and bogs matters because they are the most carbon-rich ecosystems on the planet, with the potential to sequester carbon on a colossal scale. Globally, there is more carbon stored in wetlands than in all the world's forests combined. In the UK, the UK's wetlands are big, making it our single most important terrestrial carbon sink with around 11 million tonnes of carbon still in the Lowlands. Less than a quarter of these wetlands have escaped human efforts to exploit, drain or otherwise manipulate its natural and self-regenerating condition. When drained for agriculture, settlement, or peat cutting, oxidation releases greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Rather than the precious carbon sinks that they are when undrained, decimated peatlands are a dangerous liability: it is estimated that, globally, wetlands are in such poor condition that they are net producers of CO<sub>2</sub>, emitting up to 3 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> annually. The UK's wetland peatlands are releasing 3.7 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> every year into the atmosphere – 300,000 tonnes of this is from the Somerset Levels and Moors.

We are cradling dolly – through the proverbial mine – into an area where, in the UK and small number of other countries at least, the ecological value of peat is recognised. In the rest of the world, peat is regarded as a waste and the safe disposal of peat products have been broken by governments and a theme will not be a complete ban on peat in the horticultural sector or in agriculture until 2030. Gardening and horticulturalists' party for peat is not without reason. As per the sponge-like quality of living moss, peat has excellent moisture retention. It is also, inducing less frequently pathogenic fungi, seedlings and insures them to be watered whilst keeping roots aerated. Peat is inert in comparison to freshly composted material that can contain a plethora of unwanted seeds, fungi and microbes that are at best a nuisance to gardeners and at worst, may be pathogenic to the plants they are trying to cultivate. The quality of 'peat-free' products is not always consistent and the use of peat is still a hotly debated and contested. Coconut coir is one such material, requiring large volumes of water and chemical treatment and has other environmental impacts, including local pollution and transportation from distant processing facilities in South Asia.

Past has a remarkable relationship with society, culture and heritage, acting as a custodian or keeper of ancient artefacts and relics. In perspective of one's views of the past industry, we are indebted to the past cutters who discovered prehistoric artefacts and for the knowledge of the lives of our ancestors that these objects have contributed towards. Whilst it is likely that many items will, inadvertently or callously, have been pulverised by scythe and excavator bucket, many workers and companies downed shovels and called in the archaeologists as soon as there were signs of unusual objects in the past.

This uneasy syncretism reflects other ways in which the Somerset Levels and Moors have had a persistently strained relationship with Man, which has insisted on submitting the Levels ever further to conditions that suit human settlement and needs. The place is intensely experienced as a landscape in the most sense of the word – with the leavings of its earlier tenants embedded into the fibres of the earth. If the Levels are to remain inhabitable, efforts will need to accelerate to mitigate rising sea levels and the increased rainfall due to climate change that we are already facing. Perhaps counter-intuitively, reventing the bogs can be part of this – not just to absorb carbon but to soak up water that would otherwise cause flooding. If we fail to extend a fraction of the reverence and respect that the first farmers had for this place then, sooner than we might imagine, the Somerset Levels we experience today will re-surge and revert to the history and archaeology once was, and, perhaps, it would feel less uncomfortable being there.

Jesse Alexander  
Stoke St. Michael, 2025

This essay was originally written to accompany the first exhibition of *The Digging Season* during PhotoFrame 2023 and has been updated for accuracy and

A fully referenced copy is available on request.

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<https://perspectivesonplace.wordpress.com/2026/01/14/the-digging-season-2025/>



Reading area including literature on the cultural and ecological context of Somerset, as well as photobooks and monographs relating to Somerset. Also included were photobooks by other practitioners who have been influential to my practice, and some of my own other book projects including my textbook *Perspectives on Place: Theory and Practice in Landscape Photography* (2015)





'In Conversation' exhibition launch  
with Dr. Tom Baugh, Johnson Hall, Millfield School.  
12.09.25

Photos © Moment Photography

WATCH: <https://www.youtube.com/live/DieiZ9UI788>















A-Level Photography student work, made during field trip to Avalon Marshes with Jesse Alexander, hung in gallery foyer providing a prologue to the exhibition.






Photography A-Level student work,  
made during field trip to Avalon  
Marshes with Jesse Alexander,  
hung in gallery foyer.

ATKINSON  
GALLERY

# DEFORMED SURFACES

JESSE ALEXANDER



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UNCOVERING SOMERSET LANDSCAPES

JESSE ALEXANDER

MILLFIELD  
MILLFIELD Street, Somerset BA50 2DQ  
www.millfield.co.uk

10 SEP - 10 OCT 2025

## Threshold Zone 2006-2008

Although rivers and the underground are culturally synonymous with the realm of secrets and where bad things happen, they have also long functioned as sites of adoration as well as provided shelter and sanctuary. *Threshold Zone* explores this dichotomy by placing the viewer in the space between the entrances to underground spaces (referred to as the light cave) and where the space enters a state of physical darkness - 'the dark zone'. As well as documenting sites of past industry heritage and culture, the works attempt to inspire universal images of mythology, fantasy and science fiction.

Using a large format camera with only available light to illuminate the subject, some locations required exposure times as long as one week to render the final image. The resulting pieces explore photography's intrinsic relationship with time, disrupting the notion of photography's ability to freeze movement and moments. The long exposure left the artist waiting to apply to such spaces, where time elapsed at a different pace to the world above.

There are among a suite of five lightboxes presented as the inclusion of my myth studies, and were fabricated especially for installation at SouthWest Caves in Bristol, which have a rich history and mythology of their own.

1

## The Digging Season 2023

Peat has been mined in Somerset since the Roman occupation, and thereafter successive authorities have been determined to drain, store up, and otherwise 'improve' what is England's largest wetland. Healthy bogs can sequester carbon in colossal soils, but when they dry out, stored carbon decomposes and bogs become net producers of greenhouse gases, having a severe impact on climate change. The destruction of the Somerset Levels and Moors has released millions of tons of CO<sub>2</sub> that has built up over the past seven thousand years or so. Yet while peat has gradually accumulated on the recent bogs of the levels, the assemblage conditions have secured a wealth of artefacts that are archaeologically unique and provide an understanding of ancient cultures that we would otherwise be ignorant of.

The Digging Season links topographic photographs of the final three of the peat mining industry in Somerset with old lines of artefacts that were discovered in the process of peat cutting. Illustrations of contemporary objects collected during excavations into the Levels allude towards future possibilities for the place and encourages new narratives to unfold. These are inspired by the drawings made in the 1930s and 50s by the Somerset Levels Project who were responsible for much of the archaeological feedback on the Levels.

The video *Deformed Surface*, records the experience of travelling through a typical part of this landscape a road that is usually eroded due to the removal of flumes to contour around, and undulating almost comically - undermined by aggressive drainage to extract peat from over greater depths.

13

## CONTENTS

- 1 Preface
- 3 Rückenfiguren
- 5 Threshold Zone
- 7 Elementary Husbandry
- 9 The Nymph and the Shepherd
- 11 The Silent Land
- 13 The Digging Season
- 15 Biography
- 17 Index
- 18 Contact



## Elementary Husbandry 2013-2016

Popular narratives of the spaces beyond our towns and cities as places of sanctuary and escape are sources of great personal interest and undergo the concerns and motivations behind *Elementary Husbandry*. This project began after I relocated from Bristol to North Somerset. Over time, my early opportunistic photographs began to incorporate both my personal reflections on my immediate surroundings and my developing understanding of landscape representation. It was during this period that I wrote my 'landscape journal' *Perspectives on Place* and making these photographs was a welcomed foil to the more academic, screen-intensive process of drafting a textbook.

The series draws upon two founding pieces of Western literature: Hesiod's *Works and Days* (c.700 BCE) and Virgil's *Georgics* (c.40 BCE) which explore rustic themes and use rural settings to frame multifaceted narratives. These works examine a range of fundamental concepts, such as human ancestry and the past, visually and on the page, emptying the 'landscape' - best defined by literary critic and poet William Sorenson as 'the process of putting the complex into the simple'. These ancient texts, taking the form of a farmer's almanac, conferred practical advice for farming alongside instructions for leading a virtuous and virtuous existence. They are widely accepted as the progenitor for the pastoral motif that has since become ubiquitous within depictions of the agrarian landscape.

*Elementary Husbandry* was exhibited at Bank Street Arts in Sheffield in 2016 and coincided with a residency that resulted in *The Nymph and the Shepherd*.

7

## The Nymph and the Shepherd 2016-2017

Conciding with the exhibition of *Elementary Husbandry*, this residency with Bank Street Arts in Sheffield extended my enquiry into the pastoral. Over the course of a year I would send a new photograph each week, which was printed and displayed in the gallery. Permeated with how pastoral imagery is often intertwined with romantic (surrealist) narratives and tropes, I imagined the collaboration as a correspondence between lovers, casting myself as the *shepherd* and the gallery as the adored 'nymph'.

Key to conceptualising this project was the discovery of two late Elizabethan poems, the *Pastorale Shepherd* to his Love by Christopher Marlowe written in 1598 and the *Amphigory Reply to the Shepherd* written in response by Sir Walter Raleigh the following year. These were composed at a time when European conditions to the New World, with tales of exotic, Arcadian landscapes, excited the popular imagination and wishfulness for a long lost Golden Age. Along the lines of the structure of Marlowe's stanza, Raleigh's nymph provides a line-by-line rebuttal of the ardent romantic idealism expressed by Marlowe's shepherd.

Rather than with love poems saturated with idealised images of nature, I attempted to woo and seduce the object of my desire with documentary realism - topographic images faithfully rendering how I experienced the land over the year.

8

Jesse Alexander has been preoccupied with the land and being outside since childhood, whether playing games in fields as a boy, tramping after his grandmother on her farm, or walking through moor and heath. This lifelong relationship with rural environments has evolved into a sustained critical photographic practice working over two decades. *Deformed Surfaces* being together a body of work motivated by the complex representation of the land, one that is both personally reflective and grounded, particularly in the Somerset countryside.

Emotionally invested in both town and country, Jesse's photography repeatedly engages with the visual languages, tropes, and clichés of rural Britain, sometimes embracing them, more often than not interrogating them. His work challenges the conventions of pastoral imagery. I explore the contradictions inherent in how we authenticate or commodify 'the countryside'. By tracing a critical line in these familiar forms, Jesse invites viewers to consider the distance between landscape as appearance and lived experience.

Time, as both subject and methodology, lies at the core of this practice. In contrast to photography's traditional role in freezing a moment, Jesse's approach slows time down. Projects emerge gradually over the years through repeated visits, accumulated observations, and learning. In works such as *Threshold Zone*, time is not merely recorded but manipulated and stretched, subverting expectations of the photographic medium. The Somerset Levels and Moors as part of a morning 'young' landscape, where time is not marked by ruins but by the slow accumulation of peat, layer by layer, are not romanticised but carefully observed. What results is an evocative visual language where presence and memory intersect.

Throughout Jesse's work, a tone of quiet sobriety prevails, an atmosphere that often borders on melancholy. His images resist spectacle and embrace stillness. The weathered textures of the land, its forgotten corners and awkward juxtapositions are quietly celebrated. A subtle irony threads its way through many of these photographs, confronting us incongruity or even surreality as juxtaposition having a view like a stage set or the starting geometry of tracks carved by heavy machinery through soft fields. These moments unsettle the familiar and suggest deeper narratives at play.

Jesse's work offers a way to experience the land on multiple levels, visually, emotionally, and physically. Fields, hedgerows, and thresholds are not just subjects but also sites of transaction and transformation. His images capture the traces of both human presence and absence, weaving the physical land between natural processes and cultural interventions.

In this way, Jesse Alexander's work offers more than the visual documentation of a form of enquiry into place, perception, memory and meaning. *Deformed Surfaces* is not simply a collection of landscapes but a topographic exploration of what it means to look, to return, and to know a place honestly.

Jesse Alexander  
Director of the Atkinson Gallery

1

## Rückenfiguren 2006

I was on an assignment, scouting possible locations across Bristol for a potential reality TV show, and I found myself at early dawn before shopping carts piled around Whitworth, which is at the very south of Bristol. I didn't really know the area, apart from the road through Whitworth up the winding road to Dunbury that I had travelled on hundreds of times going to and from my grandparents' home in the Chew Valley. I remember being struck by a narrow country road that extended from this suburban locale, somewhat incongruously very closely up the road side of Dunbury with Dunbury being a stone transition - some 'wildland' - bridging town and countryside, but I was conscious of how along the threshold we were.

I followed my curiosity, and this road, not much more than a track, wended towards crumbling at the edges. Pathways were filled with rubbish, there was fly tipping at every passing glen and gateway. Then I drew up to this one where two farmers were burning rubbish, and took this picture. It immediately expressed, in an image, tensions that I felt between the urban and rural but couldn't really put into words. It instantly took me back to Capes David Friedrichs *Wander Above a Sea of Fog*, reminiscent and the sublime. The figure going into a landscape - a 'Rückenfigur' - like Friedrichs is a ubiquitous motif in visual culture, deployed as a tactic to remove the viewer within the view, commonly used in advertising.

Travelling to and from Bristol via Dunbury always transports me back to these childhood journeys, conflicting feelings and mixed emotions about the town and the country.

2

## The Silent Land 2017-2021

The Silent Land observes, over several years, the forestry Commission plantation at Stockhill Wood near Fribury in the Mendips, close to where I was born at the time. 'Tidally Wood', as I knew it by, remains intimately connected to my own childhood, as somewhere I was taken to regularly by my family and take my children there now.

Although not especially setting out to do so, I ended up recording the phenology of the forest, making it regular. I wouldn't always take pictures: missing spaces, discovering new parts of the forest, realising memories. Being surprised or disorienting myself became as important as the responses that sometimes resulted in the photos, unprocessed for months. The photographs of this, mostly square or of woodland very much began to resemble to my own mind about the period.

Ecologically speaking, Stockhill Wood is remarkable, although it bears all kinds of contradictions that are typical of so many landscapes: the forest resembles what we would casually describe as 'natural' or 'wild', yet it is mostly handily managed for timber and as an important destination for leisure. It could equally be described as an industrial landscape - it is certainly a post-industrial landscape: the trees actually grow on the site of post-industrial land works - the remains of much more recent works are still present at just stones thrown from the wood, and features in *Threshold Zone*. The route of a Roman road also passes through the wood. The woods hold many stories and personal experiences. While there are many health benefits to being in places like these, they can be imbued with pathos and melancholy.

3

Rückenfiguren, East Dunbury  
70 x 70 cm, Golden Print, 2006

Lead Tunnel  
61 x 70 cm, Duerksen Print on lightbox, 2008

Atkins, Hollow Marsh  
89 x 74 cm, C-Type Print, 2006

Widifire, Paddy Fields  
89 x 60 cm, Golden Print, 2007

Hedge, Cuckley  
84 x 60 cm, Golden Print, 2007

Unsettled #1  
25.5 x 20.5 cm, C-Type Print, 2007

Widifire, Farm, Westbury  
80 x 84 cm, Golden Print, 2007

Still from 'Deformed Surfaces'  
Video 7 minutes, 2023

Clay Pipes, Street Moor  
26.5 x 36 cm, art on paper, 2023

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4

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5



# DEFORMED SURFACES



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