

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)

FALMOUTH
UNIVERSITY

 MILLFIELD

ATKINSON
GALLERY

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 Street) which was attended by 202 people. 853 people visited the exhibition during the month it was open.



General Installation View

Jesse Alexander



Installation View:

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

Jesse Alexander has been preoccupied with the land and being outside since childhood, whether playing wargames in fields as a boy, traipsing 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 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. 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 not romanticised but carefully observed. A subtle irony threads its way through many of these photographs, manifesting as incongruity or even surrealism: a collapsed barn framing a view like a stage set or the startling 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 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 Atkinson Gallery



Rückenfiguren
(2006)

Giclée Print
70 x 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 *Wanderer 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 Giclé 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
Compton

Woods are
mentioning a
tree can
see a pale
gothic glow
like a glow
of breathing
and winter
forests are
not even to
take the
light.
The logs
are in rows
and perfectly
growing over
This is a
darkness
choked, on
overgrown
landscape is
ancient but
from the
Shallow
toppings have
revealed the
leaves, the
sooty, a
batture
and deflated
trees are
decomposed
into the air
The air
of the soul.



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 VIKA 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

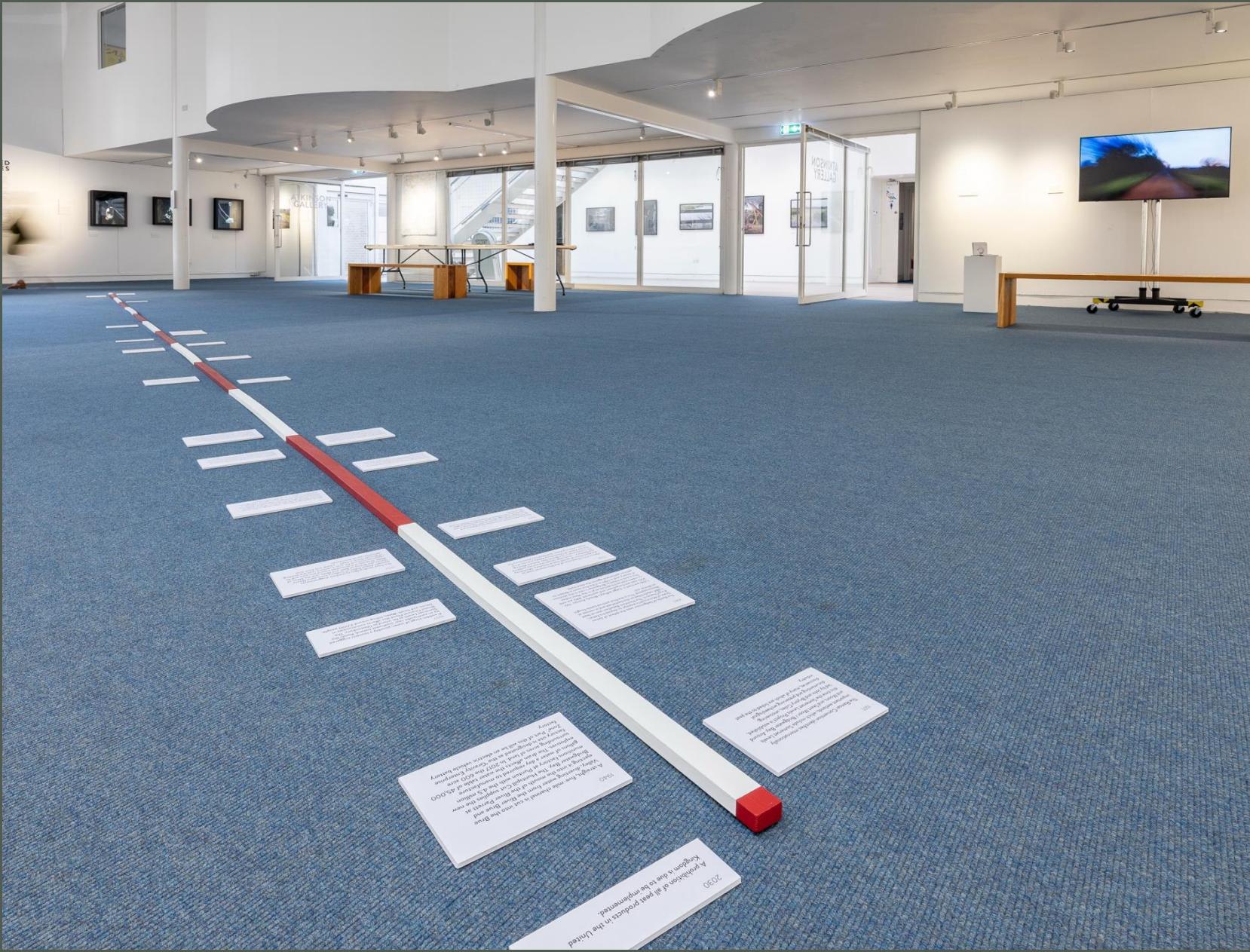
‘The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd’
By Sir Walter Raleigh, 21 x 30 cm

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 Giclé prints, 106 x 76 cm

Three Giclé 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 CO₂ that has built up over the past seven thousand years or so.





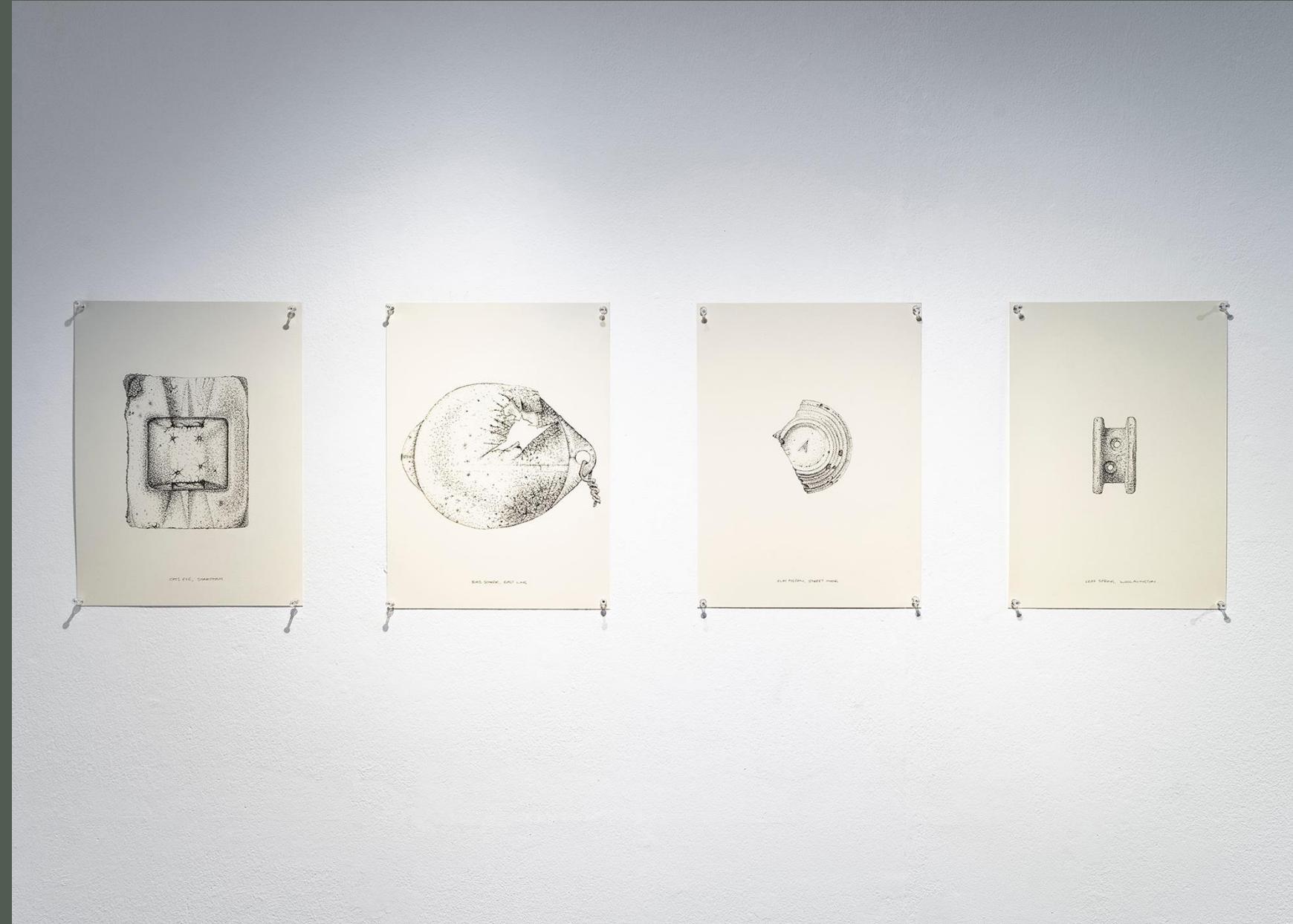
(Left to right)

Roman flagon, c.224 CE

Bronze Age palstave and sickle, 1400~1200 BCE

Neolithic carinated pot, c.3800 BCE

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.



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>





Private View, 12.10.25
© Moment Photography



Private View, 12.10.25
© Moment Photography



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.

DEFORMED SURFACES



Atkinson Gallery Instagram feed
<https://www.instagram.com/atkinsongallery/>