

Sara Dudman: ‘Walks within the Cotswolds Land Circle (The King's Men, Rollright Stones)’.

## Sara Dudman - the *Ley of the Land* project.

> The task of the Speaker for the Dead is to bring the dead into the present, so as to make more response-able living and dying in times yet to come.[1]
>
> Donna J. Haraway

Sara Dudman lives and works in the Blackdown Hills in Somerset and, while she’s self-evidently an artist, she refers to herself as a ‘seeker-sharer’. Why is easily explained. Over the last few years, she’s worked on the numerous diverse projects that are central to her work – as an artist she has what I call an ‘ensemble practice’[2] – in which she takes on many roles. She’s a hiker, an avid collaborator both with interdisciplinary human partners and with more-than-

humans, a curator, and a divisor and leader of locally based artistically oriented projects that set out to reinterpret the ecological relationality of our being part of the natural world'. I've known and admired Sara's work long enough to be able to confirm the accuracy of this extensive list.[3]

Sara is also, as the exhibition at Little Buckland Gallery in the Cotswolds in September 2026 made very clear, what Donna J. Haraway calls a 'Speaker for the Dead', a phrase borrowed from the science fiction of Orson Scott Card. We habitually think of 'the dead' in anthropomorphic terms, as "our" dead. But here that risks forgetting that Sara's medium isn't commercially manufactured paint, but carefully prepared earth pigments made, in this case, from locally gathered Cotswold samples of earth and Jurassic limestone. Earth in the Cotswolds has formed because of the breaking-down of the wide range of everyday living matter intermixed with the consequence of the erosion of a sedimentary limestone. Stone formed between one and a half and two million years ago from the remains of organisms that lived and died in a warm, shallow, sea. It's these processes, also intimately bound up with the water cycles of rain and tide, that the "painterly" activity used to make the works in the exhibition evoke. The taken-for-granted transformations, through living and dying, that produce the basic substance of soil on which our, and all other organic, life depend.

Of course, there's a good deal more to Sara's work than this. It's also engaged with the innumerable traces that our own human dead have left on the Cotswold landscape – traces seen, remembered, and reanimated through her engagement with different groups of the living. Most directly with local walkers – members of the Evesham Rambling Club with whom she made eight Nomadic Sporadic walks - with Heaps, a contemporary Morris Side, with Arabella Kiszely, whose curation of the exhibition exceeded all the usual understandings of that term, and with Hannah Earl, the filmmaker who allows exhibition viewers to gain a vivid sense of the collaborative processes at the centre of Sara's practice. Others, less directly involved, include all those in various official roles concerned with the guardianship of old monumental sites who, through Sara, are now reminded that those monuments were once the focus of living ritual. If all this makes the work sound a little solemn, in some respects it is. But the project underpinning the exhibition also generated friendships, shared purposeful creative activity, the joy of involvement in the ritual of dancing in an ancient place, and the celebratory outcome that's evident in the richness and subtlety of Sara's paintings and Hannah Earl's beautiful and succinct film.



As an exhibition, *Ley of the Land* is the outcome of a substantive project that, in its collaborative aspects, has involved Sara working closely with multiple collaborators, all brought together by their engagement with the ancient Cotswold Land Circle and the host of trackways and archaeologically important sites within it. A collaboration that's involved walking, collecting material samples and, at one point, all the project participants performing traditional Cotswolds dances together within the stone circle of The King's Men. Central to the walks as physically engaging with those ancient trackways, routes, monuments, ley lines and earth works, was the willingness of participants to collect the earth and stone that Sara later made into pigment. Pigment used, for example, in making the Jar paintings, produced by the effects of walking or dancing on the combination of small passages of carefully selected printed text, pigment and water.




Jar Painting: *Nomadic Sporadic Walk from Greedy Goose to Rollright Stones*

Each sample of material collected on the walks was stored in Sara's studio ready for use, carefully labelled with the location where it was found and the name of the finder. In this way, everyone's act in a specific place is respected and the group's collaboration subliminally encoded within Sara's making of the paintings. An encoding that is then acknowledged in the titles of the finished paintings - for example: *Walking Along Ryknild Street by Day and Night with Carl, Clive, Hannah, Lesley, Lyn, Mike & Trevor*, or *Walking with Uncertainty (Oolitic limestone ridge) with Rachel, Selena, and Kristina.*



Sara Dudman: ‘Walking Along Ryknild Street by Day and Night with Carl, Clive, Hannah, Lesley, Lyn, Mike and Trevor’.

This aspect of the project is the result of Sara’s slow, patient making; work centrally focused by a series of irregularly shaped paintings – shapes derived from the silhouettes of collected stones - created in large part using pigments made from the collected samples that are then both poured and drawn with. (The white gesso ground and black Indian ink she also uses in each work provide the “day” and “night”, extending the tonal range, within which the earth pigments play out their quiet dramas). During a long period of testing out the potential possibilities of her earth pigments through studio experiments, small, unexpected images began to appear. Their appearing may have been aided by Sara’s embodied remembrance of many years of life drawing but the result, a series of vivid, if somehow still elusive, Earth Goddesses, emerged directly from manipulating matrixes of liquid, earthy, material.

Several of these Goddesses appear to me to be dancing, joyously or furiously, and naked. Some, clothed, seem to dance more solemnly. At least two seem to be in the process of metamorphosis into, or out of, the forms of spider and bear. At first sight an almost tangential element of the exhibition, I want to suggest that these Goddesses are, in fact, at its heart.

Explaining why requires linking aspects of Sara’s project to the deep past. Her way of working with the materials that make up her paintings is akin to scrying, the ancient activity whereby an individual gazes into a reflective or translucent medium – although proverbially tealeaves in a saucer do just as well – until the conscious mind lets go and the scryer enters a trance-like state. Scrying today is usually linked to fortune-telling but, in the past, served to access hidden truths or receive prophetic or spiritual messages. It’s also related to the meditative state by which a lot of the creative work of artists, poets, creative people in general, open to what inspires their work.



Sara Dudman ‘Earth Goddess’ (Study 2)

> *In her lecture* The Solace of Artemis *in which she takes about the goddesses’ roots in an ancient Bear Mother goddess*, *Paula Meehan describes attending a gathering of the tribes of north-west Canada, to which each had brough their ceremonial drum. She watched the dances and the saddest was the newest: ‘one man on his own danced the dance of the Vietnam veterans. The only man left of those who’d come home to that particular tribe from the war. Danced like a wounded bear’.*[4]

Artists tend to be shy about inspiration, particularly in the context of writing grant applications or talking to the art press. It can all-too-easily suggest the uncomfortable, politically incorrect, notion of the (male) artist’s (female) muse. None-the-less, as Sara would admit, “something” other than the artist’s conscious “self” is involved in initiating making art works. The cynical or sceptical reader will probably want to stop at this point, exiting this text with the conviction that Sara’s Goddess figures are “just” unconscious memories of life drawing brought into play by an open-ended use of earth as pigment. I have no problem with that view as the series’ starting point, but my sense of the genesis of the *Earth Goddesses* series goes back deeper, supported by the cultural equivalent to the knowledge that, as some scientists now believe, we carry the subliminal memory of our entire evolution encoded in our genes.

Thanks to a description of a beautifully crafted shield in Homer’s *Iliad*, I can speculate that the labyrinth at Knossos wasn’t a labyrinthine cellar in which to hide the Minotaur. Instead, it was very possibly a labyrinth-patterned palace floor on which young men and women danced: ‘holding their hands upon the wrists one of the other…. Now would they run round with cunning feet exceeding lightly…and now again would they run in rows toward each other. And

a great company stood around the lovely dance, taking joy therein.' (Whether this involved bulls in some way, as wall paintings at Knossos might suggest, we'll probably never know). We do know that the name Ariadne, for whom Homer says this floor was made, means in its earliest Minoan form 'most holy'. That suggests she was originally a goddess, one of several "downgraded" by patriarchy, which reduced Ariadne to a mere human accomplice in a story about a hero. However, Ariadne was in all probability the Minoan form of the Great Goddess and, more importantly here, the Mistress of a communal ritual dance physically mapped out on a palace floor. (Maybe she appears in the exhibition as Sara's *Earth Goddess* no 3*)*? There is also evidence to suggest that such goddesses, sometimes called Mistress of the Animals, have roots running back to the great Bear Mother, venerated by cults that, in all probability, originated in the Middle Palaeolithic era.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Sara's *Earth Goddesses* are somehow a literal summoning up of Goddesses like Ariadne as Mistress of the Labyrinth. What I am suggesting is that Sara unconsciously tapped into a continuity with senses of places like the stone circle of The King's Men which, archaeology tells us, were intimately connected with communal recognition of the cosmic dance of day with night, light with darkness, and of the cycles of the stars and seasons. A dance of cosmic relationality physically mapped out, not on a Minoan palace floor, but by standing stones in the landscape of the Cotswold hills. And that sense of cultural continuity, however tenuous, matters. Why is suggested by Ginette Paris when she refers, in the context of understanding the earth as Gaia (the Greek's primordial earth goddess and, quite probably, a "late" variation on the original Ariadne). In that context, the environmental value of:

> … conceiving of the earth "as if" she were a living organism or being, that is, "as if" Gaia actually existed and her breathing, her activity were the process of equilibration of the planetary ecosystem. And, we may add: "as if" mythic thought, once again, has intuited what science has discovered by its own means.[5]

Many of us have some degree of difficulty becoming deeply emotionally engaged by following scientific arguments about the peril faced by life on earth, if this is based on the scientific analysis of data. We may, quite understandably, find it easier to engage with that peril when it's related, if only metaphorically, to the earth as a living, nurturing organism. One now made chronically sick by human greed, neglect and extractive abuse. I'm not proposing an either/or approach. One of the functions of art is to help us hold distinctly different, even contradictory, perceptions together – in this case on one hand mental/scientific knowledge and on the other emotional/artistic knowing. If we choose to listen, we already have all the scientific facts about the socio-environmental crisis we face. What, finally, I see Sara's series of Earth Goddesses, in all their various, differently inflected forms, asking us to do is to wake up to that as an emotional truth. But they can also remind us, as does the moment in Hannah Earl's film when all the participants in the walks dance with Heaps within The King's Men, that the joys and sorrows of the dance of relationality go on, regardless of whether we're aware of them.



Sara Dudman ‘Earth Goddess’ (Study 3)

If I were to stick my neck out and associate Sara’s project with the “patronage” of a goddess, I might reach back to the ancient civilization of Sumar. There we find the goddess Inanna, who: ‘symbolizes consciousness of transitions and borders, places of intersection and crossings over that imply creativity and change and all the joys and doubts that go with a human consciousness that is flexible, playful, never certain for long’.[6] It should go without saying that I’m not referring to Inanna as a divinity to be literally worshiped, but as an image of the embodiment of those “higher” (“deeper”?) attributes, that are sometimes called archetypal.

Dr Iain Biggs RWA

End notes.

---

[1] Donna J. Haraway (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* Durham & London, Duke University Press p. 69.

[2] Iain Biggs (2020) ‘Ensemble Practices’ in Cameron Cartiere and Leon Tan (eds). *Routledge Companion to Art in the Public Realm* London & New York, Routledge.

[3] These have included projects both of her own devising and in partnership with communities, with conservation, wildlife and heritage organisations, and with the geologist Mathilde Braddock.

[4] Paula Meehan (2016) *Imaginary Bonnets with Real Bees in Them.* Dublin, University College Dublin Press, p. 45.

[5] Ginette Paris (1990) *Pagan Grace: Dionysos, Hermes, and the Goddess Memory in Daily Life* Dallas, Spring Publications; p. 178.

[6] Sylvia Brinton Perera (1981) *Descent to the Goddess* Toronto, Inner City Books p. 16.