

Last chance to see the exhibition at Abbot Hall Art Gallery! – Tracing The Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women

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Artist Natalie Hughes has worked in collaboration with five Cumbrian Farm Women to examine the complexities of their lives as women working in agriculture. This blog has been commissioned to respond to her findings and develop a new body of research in response to the exhibition, Tracing the Landscape



**LAST CHANCE TO SEE THE EXHIBITION AT
ABBOT HALL ART GALLERY!**

Posted on June 6, 2018 by Natalie Hughes

Tracing The Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women closes on Saturday (9th June). This project has been widely covered in the national and local press from the **BBC** and **The Big Issue** to the **Westmorland Gazette**.

The five sheds that form the main part of the exhibition are the product of a year

long collaboration between Patricia MacKinnon-Day and the farm women: Mary Brough, Joyce Dalton, Maria Benjamin, Janet Willson and Caroline Grindrod. Inside each shed you can access the interviews between these farmers and Patricia whilst being surrounded by artefacts from each woman's day-to-day life. It is an immersive experience, which gently leads you into the intricacies of another's world.



collection of personal objects belonging to the farm women – @Patricia MacKinnon-Day

"Empathy is key to my research, as learning how it feels to be part of that community and becoming completely embedded as an artist on site is crucial to the success of the artwork." – Patricia MacKinnon Day

"This process of developing understanding over time helps me to access complex meanings within a place, identify special codes, rules and the symbolic meanings of things: semiotic clues as to what is going on." – Patricia MacKinnon Day

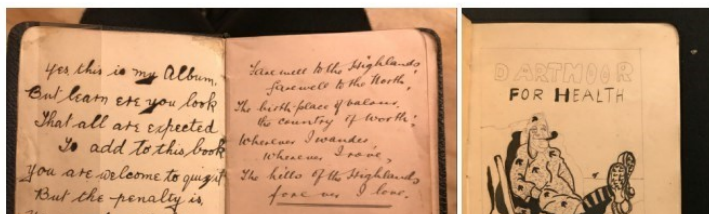
Patricia's artistic practice enables the audience to feel part of these lives in an almost familial way rather than as an opportunistic voyeur. Listening to the women talk about their personal and working lives with a conversational ease places you with them, sipping an imaginary cup of tea. Then, in this environment, with your invisible brew (milk, no sugar, strong... squeeze the bag please), sat in a space unique to each woman and surrounded by objects personal to them, you find yourself absorbing the intricate details of their lives in all their complexity.

This idea has also been developed into a number of **educational and creative workshops** led by Abbot Hall Art Gallery and aimed at children. Taking a cue from *Tracing The Landscape*, these activities invite families to interview each other. Making time to listen to other people's stories is an important act we often dismiss.

With technology at our convenience and celebrity culture plastered everywhere, the quiet foundations of our lives and histories – both personal and collective – get forgotten or overlooked. Add to this the fact that women's history within agriculture has little if any record at all, and you begin to understand how something so obvious and integral to an industry, which itself is a founding block of British culture, can remain invisible.

In Maria Benjamin's shed, notable objects include a small hand-written diary from her husband's father, who had Nibthwaite Grange Farm before her, a bespoke bottle feeder made from an Irn Bru bottle and some handmade soaps. I have already mentioned Maria's soaps in an earlier blog post **Rules of the Land**. This post placed Maria's work within the context of female-led diversification in farming, which has a long history.

The diary of Maria's father-in-law is a playful reminder of life shaped by society – its structures and events – but lived independently. On the first page of the diary, a farewell to the Scottish Highlands is written and dated 1913. This little booklet has invited others fill its pages with their musings and it takes us right through the First World War and across the North of England up until 1938.





pages from the diary in Maria's shed

The Irr Bru bottle is significant as it is an invention of Maria's, which she says works better than the feeder bottles you buy. Maria is originally from Scotland, making this pop-bottle-feeder a small nod to her origins.



Irr Bru lamb feeder

With a needs-must and a make-do attitude, farmers have operated with a proud stoicism that has gained them little recognition but a sense of autonomy many of us can only dream of.

"I sometimes think we are so independently minded because we have seen just enough of the wider world to know we like our own old ways and independence best" – James Rebanks, 2015

James Rebanks is the author of a book called *The Shepherd's Life* (2015) which tells the tale of his family's six-hundred-year history of farming in the Lake District. He notes how the landscape plays a significant role in shaping farming routines, particularly within Cumbrian hill-farming. This information may seem a little

particularly within Cumbrian hill-farming. This information may seem a little obvious but, once again it is something that is often overlooked. We pick up our meat, conveniently wrapped in cellophane, from the supermarket after a long day in the office, go home, turn on the telly, cook, watch, eat, wash, sleep and start again. We're divorced for the land.

In a recent **interview by Lakeland Arts**, Mary Brough mentions this disconnect we suffer, citing it as one of the main problems that affect contemporary farming.

"a lack of understanding [from outside the farming community] of how food is produced and how the landscape and farming are intertwined, are the biggest problems we face [in agriculture]." – Mary Brough

Mary also talks about the tough reality of her work, which is far more challenging than the average job. However, the benefits reaped by her labour bring a sense of personal achievement that outweighs any monetary gain.

"My type of hill farming is physically and mentally demanding. Anyone starting off should be prepared to work long hours and give it their all. It is a lifestyle not a job. When things go well it is exceptionally rewarding. I put up with a lot for those special magic moments." – Mary Brough.



lambs born last month on Mary Brough's farm – ©Mary Brough

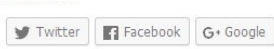
Tracing The Landscape allows us to engage with a world that we rarely have access to. It is hidden in plain sight as we speed along busy A-roads and motorways to go on leisurely walks through the Lake District. The experience that this exhibition offers is perhaps similar to that of going back stage at a gig or a play; seeing the reality behind the great show you have just consumed – the band or cast is exhausted but the achievement is all theirs.

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PUBLISHED BY NATALIE HUGHES
Freelance writer, researcher and arts professional based in Liverpool [View all posts by Natalie Hughes](#)

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