

## Exploring Place with Passion

The project Exploring Place was born from a heartfelt passion, which rapidly developed into an obsession, with a mountain in the heart of a city. The city is Edinburgh; the extinct volcano, as I discovered, had many names (both genders!) of which the most well known is 'Arthur's Seat'.

Arthur's Seat has a long history of human use, but I was interested in exploring how people feel, react and respond to this small segment of wildness, as well as my own interpretations as artist, geographer and environmentalist. Exploring Place was classified as a research project in creative interpretation for Scottish Natural Heritage and, having given birth to the idea, I was in the fortunate position of creating my own brief. This gave me the freedom to explore, probe, dissect, analyse and respond from many different angles in the most appropriate ways for this site, to experiment and to learn from mistakes as well as successes. A tightly structured remit can be stifling and restrictive for any creative worker, so a leap of faith can be required by all parties.

The project included workshops for the public targeted at local groups of all ages; one to one working with individuals developing creative responses to the site; weekly open studio sessions in a caravan/studio on site; and a small publication which brought together artworks inspired by the site (poetry, text, extracts from creative questionnaires, drawings, photographs and film stills). This was distributed throughout Edinburgh for people to pick up free.

Exploring Place has been exhibited three times. The first showing was in three different venues snaking down to Arthurs' Seat: New Street Exhibition Space (gallery, café and nightclub - the Bongo Club), Museum of Edinburgh display cases, and the Holyrood Park visitors centre. Films inspired by Arthur's Seat were projected at night in the street from dusk till dawn outside the Club-aimed at one of the most elusive audiences the urban youth market. This exhibition shoved Arthur's Seat in their faces as they danced the night away and staggered home at night.

Interpreting is so many things: finding out, expressing, uncovering, sharing, celebrating, giving different perspectives. That interdisciplinary creativity is an ideal tool to facilitate this is born out by two well respected thinkers:

Italo Calvino, in 'Invisible Cities', asserts that "the grand challenge for art is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the different 'codes' into a manifold, multifaceted vision of the world"

Jean Piaget, child psychologist, notes that "you learn through inventing, not through being taught what others know but through experiencing, inventing knowledge anew".

There was no formal evaluation of Exploring Place, but strong anecdotal evidence suggests it had a real impact. There has been a constant demand for the publication and praise for its unique multi-disciplinary approach. Copies distributed to the Edinburgh libraries 'went like hot cakes'. Historic Scotland rangers use the permanently sited work in the new Holyrood Park Education Centre to demonstrate and celebrate the different dimensions of the site. Here is a typical view from the visitors' book:

"I certainly think more about it [Arthur's Seat] than I did before. I guess I felt it was a good way to get a view of the city - but hadn't actually considered the land itself."

Exploring Place showed that landscape 'can be cool' and that Edinburgh has a fantastic resource open to us all, 24 hours a day. I haven't been able to count if more young people now stagger up the hill to see the sunrise after a hard night's clubbing, or whether visitors reflect for a moment that they are walking across an extinct volcano, but I hope they do. The project certainly created a local and international Arthur's Seat community and network that still buzzes with life.

As artist, co-ordinator and avid environmentalist this project gave me hope. Hope that this island of green can inspire stories, paintings, emotions and feelings that have the power to move people to tears. Hope that an organisation such as SNH is prepared to take a risk on an artist who has no intention of producing a monumental, landmark (landscar?) sculpture, and hope that artists and creative approaches advocated by them will become an essential part of any engaging interpretation project.

Exploring Place was also supported by Historic Scotland, Millennium Awards and Out of the Blue Trust. Please email me if you would like a copy of the Exploring Place artworks publication.

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