

FIELD STUDIES
2010
Giles Sutherland

THE term 'field studies' conjures up the idea of scientific investigation and observation — perhaps some aspect of natural history, geology or geography. Moreover, field is, in itself, a wonderfully multi-layered word which combines the idea of a specific — and usually academic — discipline with agricultural or even geomorphologic terminology.

'Field Studies', therefore, has been deliberately chosen by the Warwickshire-based artist Jo Roberts for its multiple associations and connotations. Roberts recently completed a residency in Timespan on the east coast of Sutherland, an area renowned for its geological interest. Part of Timespan's enlightened approach (as a community museum) emphasises the importance of geology in understanding many other aspects of the locale. It's what the philosopher and writer Kenneth White describes as 'geopoetic' in that the underlying geological structure and substance inform all other aspects of life.

Roberts has used geology as a metaphor for describing and understanding her art and how it might be approached. This fact becomes readily apparent in the various drawings, displays, artefacts and writings which comprise this challenging and exciting project. Indeed, Roberts' multidisciplinary combines community involvement, social history, geography, writing, cartography and 'emotional charting' — and has led her to resurrect a piece of obsolete terminology to describe her approach. Thus she describes herself as a commentariographer which she defines as 'someone who writes, mediates, ponders, portrays or records. One who comments on current events and produces an expository treatise.' Although eye-catching it's not a particularly usual piece of terminology and more accurate may be Joseph Beuys' term 'social sculptor'. Beuys believed that art could play an extended role in peoples' lives and that a definition of the artist should not be confined to conventional notions of depiction, mimesis, representation and aesthetic construction. Roberts' approach is now no longer unique or even unusual in that many 'artists' have expanded their role and practice to cover areas once considered irrelevant to the making of art.

A display of geological texts and maps emphasises Roberts' own connection and fascination with the discipline and a series of sparse pencil line drawings engages the various visual metaphors in which Roberts delights. One shows what appears to be a depiction of rock strata but instead of various items of geological terminology one finds descriptions of Roberts' various means of artistic practice: painting, performance art, multi-media, text-based, textile, film and video, conceptual, sculpture.....

Elsewhere, Roberts uses a similar approach to describe and document her residency

programme which she plots in a time-line against a geological cross-section of Sutherland. A hand-drawn map of the county of Sutherland documents Roberts' travels and adventures rather like the maps of early explorers to whom cartography was that curious mixture of the scientific and the artistic. Although Roberts has not quite written 'here be dragons' there is a sense of an adventurous and playful spirit at work with spirited annotations such as "Skerray – the bestest little PO and shop in the world. PS I fear that it has stolen a piece of my heart"; "Made pilgrimage to Inchnadamph Hotel where geologists Peach and Horne stayed --- he's the one who's responsible for all of this".

However, the centrepiece of this exhibition is undoubtedly the collection of boxes (each made by an individual contributor) invited by Roberts to fill their allocated box with anything of their choosing. Around 100 individuals from the communities of Skerray, Kinbrace, Kinlochbervie and Helmsdale have taken part and the results are as diverse as they are surprising. Like tantalising but unexpected presents the boxes invite opening and discovery. While some are factual and prosaic others are cryptic, poetic and contemplative. While some are 'off-the-cuff' and rapidly executed others are painstakingly-crafted and detailed. And although many of the makers' names are known a substantial number prefer to retain some kind of anonymity.

One participant asks : "why do I feel so compelled to garden when I live in such a beautiful landscape?" Attempting to answer his or her own question, they respond: "Is it the challenge? The desire to tame the wilderness? A primitive instinct to mark one's territory? To enclose a safe place? Although such questions are largely rhetorical the artist gives an answer in the form of an extended panorama in pencil of a fecund and beautiful garden in the midst of the denuded Highland landscape. Here, the artist seems to suggest, are not one but two human constructs.

Given the fact that those invited to fill these boxes were given carte blanche by Roberts, it is surprising how many of the artists (if that is indeed the most accurate term for describing this kind of temporary involvement with visual art) have chosen subjects close to home, either in the immediate community, locale or their own domestic setting. Meg Telfer from Skerray for example has chosen to focus on the fragility of this small community, centring her work on the term decimate. In recent years a much higher than average death rate has occurred in this small township. Telfer's text and imagery refers to Lachesis, in Greek mythology the second of the three Fates whose Roman equivalent was Decima, from where the term decimate (meaning removal of a tenth) derives. In the Roman army decimation was a disciplinary procedure where, following serious misdemeanours, every tenth legionary was compelled to take their own life or to be killed.

Another anonymous Skerray resident offers an intimate and touching self-portrait of her own life – we must assume that the artist is a woman, given the box's contents: foetal scans, felted woollen tapestry, musical scores for the pipes (The Brown Haired Maiden) – as well as images of Lamigo Bay.

Part of Roberts success therefore must centre on her ability to encourage those who

have deemed themselves 'uncreative' or 'not artists' to create work with depth, meaning and integrity.

One of Beuys' great, but often misunderstood, catch-phrases was 'Everyone an Artist' – by which he meant that creativity exists in all of us. It is the finding and nurturing of this quality which is so difficult and so easily destroyed. Fortunately, through Roberts' intervention, we are lucky enough to witness the inner creative lives of many people which would normally go unremarked or — far worse — undiscovered.