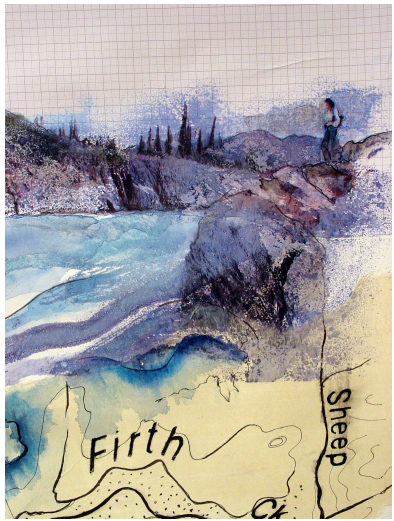
Landscapes in Dialogue: reflections

Alice Angus





Landscapes in Dialogue

There are no fences here ... when you go out of town there are no fences, but I wouldn't call this a wilderness because peoples homes are here, people live here.

In Feburary 2010 I packed up a set of drawings (*Ecologies, Time, Landmarks, Traces, Wilderness, Perception*, 2010) to send out to the Canadian arctic town of Inuvik for the first leg of a touring show during the the 25 year anniversary of Ivvavik National Park in Canada which was created by a historic Aboriginal land claim settlement The Inuvialuit Final Agreement, signed in 1984. In it the Inuvialuit agreed to give up exclusive use of their ancestral lands in exchange for guaranteed rights from the Government of Canada. The rights came in three forms: land, wildlife management and money. As a result Parks Canada and the Inuvialuit co-operatively manage Ivvavik National Park with the Inuvaluit Wisdom that the "The land will protect the people who support the protect the land". Parks Canada and Northern images have organised a touring exhibition of work from the Artist in The Park programme which I was invited to be part of by artist Joyce Majiski, in 2003 with whom I've been working with since then. The six works I sent were a reflection on the experience and of Ivvavik, Inuvik and the people I met there and the long term issues of ownership, belonging, common space and environment, raised by the trip.

Middle of Nowhere?

Bordered on the north by the Beaufort Sea and Alaska on the West, Ivvavik sits at the north western tip of Canada. A highly biodiverse region of the Western Arctic, its Inuvaluktun name 'Ivvavik' means nursery or place of giving birth. It is a portion of the calving grounds and migration route of the Porcupine caribou herd and forms a part of the Beringia Refugium; an area untouched by the last glaciation where an ice-free bridge allowed humans and animals to migrate from Asia into North America over twenty thousand years ago.

In summer 2003 I met up with artists Joyce Majiski Ron Felix, Audrea Wulf and James Ruben, guide Mervyn Joe and elder Sarah Dillon and flew out of Inuvik, across the Mackenzie Delta towards Sheep Creek. From the air (and in the imaginations of the temperate zone) the arctic taiga and tundra, is a frozen desert. But landing at the junction of Sheep Creek and the Firth River we saw tussocks of wild flowers, embroidered cushions with succulent jewel like plants, luminescent mosses and ferns; miniature gardens of Babylon. Out on the land there were larger traces of life and stories of trappers, miners, hunters and travelers. The language of the north I grew up with paints an image of bleakness, but there the myths of desolation fell away.



"Have good time miles from nowhere!" someone had said before I set off. In the world's 'wildernesses' like Ivvavik it is easy for a visitor to be lost in such a reverie of wonder at landscape that you miss the lives and culture that are part of it. There is a disjuncture between the notion of wilderness as barren, by definition disconnected from the social, and the view of land as homeland, a social place of culture, food and everyday life. To many outside the north the Arctic is still shrouded in an aura of romanticism portrayed, as it has been through the history of polar exploration, as a landscape of sublime desolation. To some, I expect, it's not a place but an imaginary landscape far away from their everyday lives. I wonder what is the global consequence of this enduring vision of the land?
One day we see five caribou. Pregnant cows lead the herd from Ivvavik into the calving grounds in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR); an area rich in oil reserves. So important are the grounds the Gwitchin people refer to them as the "sacred place where life begins". If the ANWR is opened for drilling many people believe it will result in untold damage to the herd and the people whose lives and traditions depend on it.

Landscapes in Dialogue is connected to *Topographies and Tales* a body of work that I have been creating in collaboration with Canadian artist and guide Joyce Majiski exploring the perceptions of landscape and of the North. It is driven by interests in ideas of proximity and remoteness, technology and presence, and the concept of 'wilderness' against the lived experience of a place. We began a collaboration in 2003 which took us to Ivvavik National Park in the Canadian Arctic, Glenmore Lodge in the Cairngorm Mountains, Scotland, the Klondike Institute for Art and Culture in Dawson City, Canada, Joyce's Tuktu Studio in Whitehorse and the Proboscis Studio in London. It has included short films, essays, Diffusion eBooks, a Creative Lab in London and events in Dawson City, Canada and is underpinning my new body of work exploring peoples relationship to water called *At The Waters Edge*.

These projects would not have been possible without the support of many generous individuals we met along the way and; Parks Canada, Arts Council England, London, The Canadian High Commission, Klondike Insitiute for Art and Culture, Glenmore Lodge.

You can see the films, writings and read more at:
Topograpies and Tales: http://proboscis.org.uk/projects/topographies-tales/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betrayal
speculative
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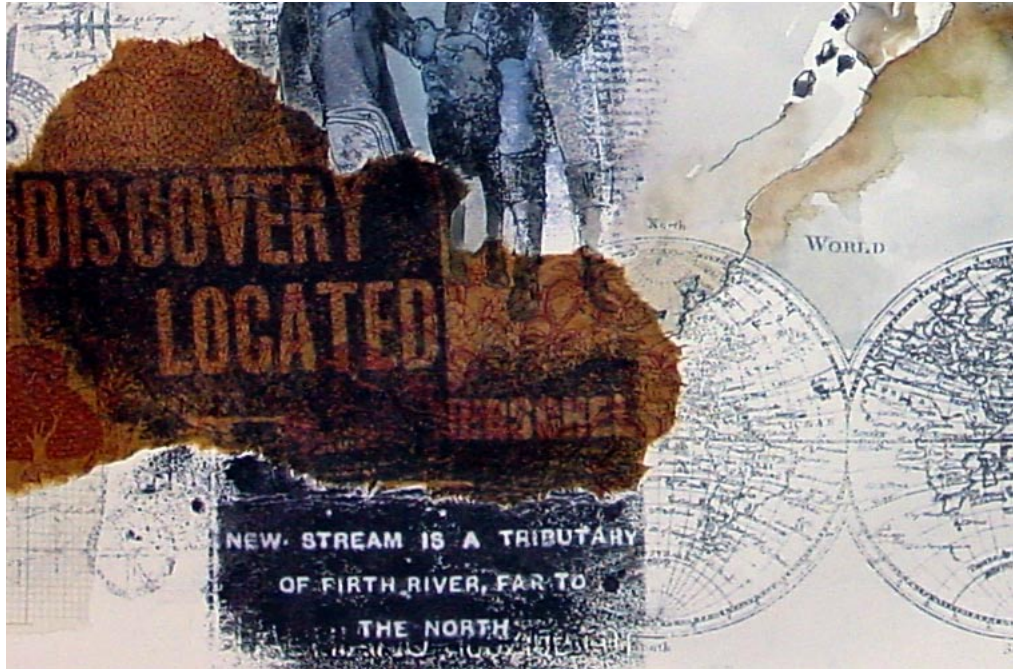
conveyance
DISCOVERY
LOCATED
NEW STREAM IS A TRIBUTARY
OF FIRTH RIVER, FAR TO
THE NORTH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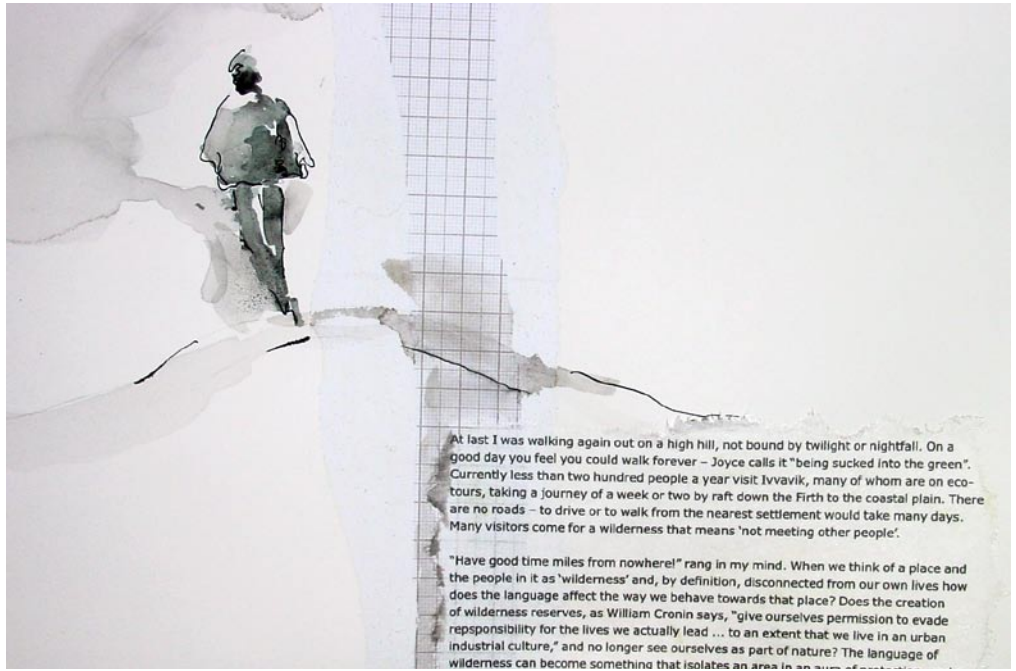

At last I was walking again out on a high hill, not bound by twilight or nightfall. On a good day you feel you could walk forever – Joyce calls it "being sucked into the green". Currently less than two hundred people a year visit Ivvavik, many of whom are on eco-tours, taking a journey of a week or two by raft down the Firth to the coastal plain. There are no roads – to drive or to walk from the nearest settlement would take many days. Many visitors come for a wilderness that means 'not meeting other people'.

"Have good time miles from nowhere!" rang in my mind. When we think of a place and the people in it as 'wilderness' and, by definition, disconnected from our own lives how does the language affect the way we behave towards that place? Does the creation of wilderness reserves, as William Cronin says, "give ourselves permission to evade repsponsibility for the lives we actually lead ... to an extent that we live in an urban industrial culture," and no longer see ourselves as part of nature? The language of wilderness can become something that isolates an area in an aura of protection, and




Firth
Sheep
Ck.

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A set of drawings (Ecologies, Time, Landmarks, Traces, Wilderness, Perception, 2010) for a touring show during the the 25 year anniversary of Ivvavik National Park in Canada which was created by a historic Aboriginal land claim settlement. These works are a reflection on the experience of a Parks Canada residency in Ivvavik and the long term issues of ownership, belonging, common space and environment, raised by the trip. Landscapes in Dialogue is connected to Topographies and Tales a body of

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