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Stockpile Garden

003
The Story Table

Winter 23/24

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Stockpile Garden: 003 The Story Table

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Periscope is a spatial design agency focused on regenerative design and public architecture.

We design and deliver resilient projects that work for people and planet, grounding our interventions within their greater ecological, topographic and social fabric. In valuing meticulous research, technical rigour and plural voices we seek to meet the challenges of our and future generations.

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Stockpile Garden is a whole new breed of garden - a landscape laboratory on one of the biggest construction sites in Europe!

Between 2022 and 2023, Periscope, Kirsty Badenoch, UCL Bartlett School of Architecture and the Department of Biochemical Engineering developed a live research project investigating human and ecological health on meanwhile sites. The project explores the significance of 'temporary' landscapes as a largely unaddressed contributor to urban green infrastructural fabric.

Following Periscope's initial research into soil health across London and the UK a site-based investigation at Barking Riverside was identified. Collaborative partners were sought to bridge research-in-practice with academia, connecting the project to established work on soil health undertaken at UCL Biochemical engineering. The project was awarded UCL Grand Challenges funding in 2022 which became a catalyst for the involvement of more partners and a nucleus of activity for other experimental work which continues beyond the grant.

Stockpile Garden transforms a working construction site on the Thames Estuary into a testing ground for brownfield biodiversity improvement methods. Designed responsively to on-site processes, Stockpile Garden explores locally-sourced, low-cost, and low-maintenance ecological restoration, inviting people, plants, protozoa and other kingdoms to thrive behind the hoarding.

As a living laboratory, the garden will continue to test bioremediation techniques and monitor biodiversity improvements over the coming years, helping to fill current knowledge gaps in the ecological functioning of brownfield sites. As a social space, it will form the stage for an unfolding programme of events.

Book 003: The Story Table

This book is part of a mini-series documenting the various aspects of Stockpile Garden, intended to be read alongside one another. The book series will be added to as the garden grows. Book 003 explores subterranean material narratives, using erosion processes to construct a moveable banquet table that will host events in and around Stockpile Garden.

"The Story Table" is a project by Kirsty Badenoch, sitting within the larger Stockpile Garden project. 'The Story Table' stems from Kirsty's material works with water / earth processes, and is documented in this book as an experiential narrative of the making process from Kirsty's perspective.

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www.stockpilegarden.com

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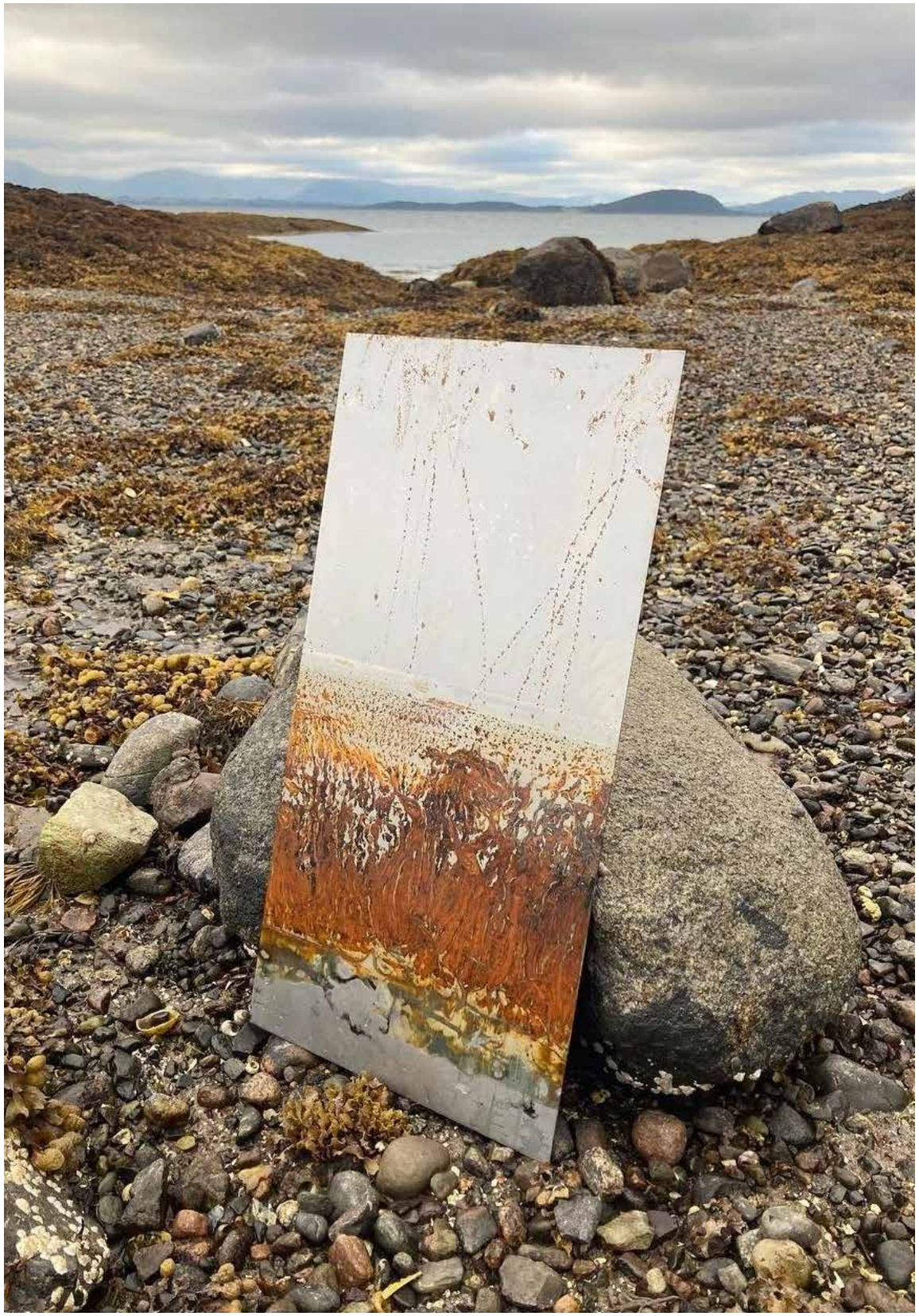
01 Steeling



For the last three years I've been developing a method of environmental printmaking through site-exposed steel erosions. I have lugged large, heavy, sharp pieces of steel along windswept coastlines, onto tiny islands and into ancient forests across the UK. There I've left them, submerged in shorelines, riverbanks and bogs for days, weeks, months. Over time the languages of the landscape begin to play out, leaving their physical imprints on the surface of the sheets. Drawings of and by the land. Long exposures of storms, tides, algal blooms and mulching leaves. The imprints, marks, colours and build-ups powerfully evidence micro-and-macro-processes that otherwise play out unseen. Each plate reflects its landscape.

The patination occurs much more quickly than you'd expect, and the mark-making is highly specific to the forces that draw them. Steel may appear strong, defiant, enduring - the matter of cars, tower blocks and the machines that make them. But natural processes swiftly take over. I always find this reassuring.

So far, I have always made the steel prints in wild landscapes, on the thickened gloopy edge between water and land. Places where the homogenised clean sheets are in sharp conflict with the messy wilderness. Yet they also weirdly belong. Perhaps the steel still remembers when it was molten, caught itself between liquid and solid. Out in the land, the plates encompass and amplify the shades of the sky.

Working with a construction site presented quite a different opportunity. The timescales and processes operating here are quite different than in wild places. Here, the plates would be exposed to contaminants and post industrial urbanisation. I consider the sites I usually work with as environmentally vulnerable, wounded. In comparison, a construction site is veritably mutilated. What is this earth going through, and what has it seen?

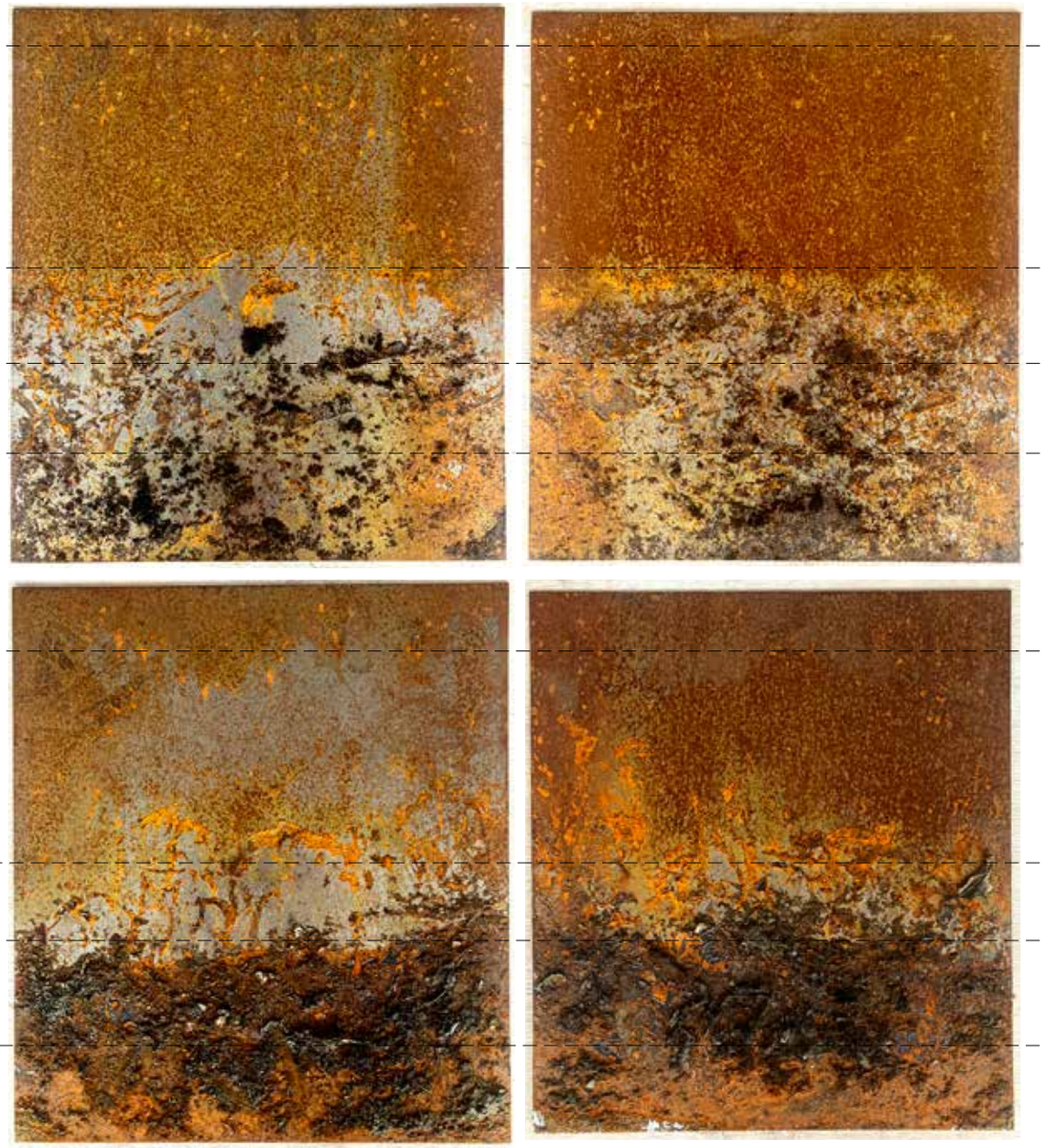
Here was an opportunity to both scale up and dig deeper. Stockpile Garden brought with it access to a huge barren site and an accommodating team of men (always men) with big diggers. I could scale my works up as far as the workshop constraints would allow, and bury the steels as deep as we could. They would remain underground for as many months as there were before Stockpile Garden opened to the public.

The pieces would ultimately be reinstalled as features in the garden, features that would share stories of subterranea. It seemed right for the plates to become tables. ‘Raised grounds’, around which people can sit, converse, debate, joke, share, eat. Exposed again to the sky, the plates would continue to patinate with use, continue to record the human conversations on top of the subterranean.

Soil Print Testing

My previous work has always been semi-exposed to air and water. To understand how the steels might respond if fully immersed underground, I buried a series of plates in Flimwell ancient woodland. They remained submerged for three months, from November to February. A time of year often perceived as being ecologically dead, the plates captured the very active decomposition and mulching of leaves into humus. The difference in ground level sunk by 300mm in the time the plates were set.

These plates were buried vertically, the ones in Stockpile Garden would be horizontal in their making, to match their final use as tables.



02 Earthing

The Thames Estuary is a place where the watery sun rises over a sharp city skyline, where herons stand waste deep in the flats alongside cargo freighters. It is a place of vast steely beauty, a place on-the-move. Alongside their human neighbours the creatures that reside here are metallic, they clank and groan and pump their noisy business across the open horizon. The transport engineer I bump into at the Project Office shows me his boat-tracking phone app over lunch. Apparently the little tugboat passing us now is carting sewage from the city to the incinerator.

Opened in 1927, this 443 acre site was once the largest steam-generating power station in Europe. Energy production at 'Barking Creekside' had ended by 1981, the legacy of which was over 400 acres of deeply polluted earth containing heavy metals, cyanide, hydrocarbons and asbestos. More recently the land at Barking Riverside has been subject to a multimillion-pound remediation scheme commencing in 2005. Despite extensive and meticulously conducted soil remediation strategies UK standards prioritise human health and not ecological. Soil being the basis for 25% the world's biodiversity, this is a sad story for urban ecology, and is seen across London, Britain and the world.

I constructed four 1m x 1m square tabletops, thin sheets reinforced with fixings for future legs. The sub-contractor team agreed to assist with the burying. I was conscious of the oddness of my requests, but they either enjoyed or endured them. We identified an appropriate site – one of the former power stations, a flat expanse sometimes used as temporary soil storage from other working areas. The stored soils and broken aggregates would be layered on top in alternating strips.

We buried the steels on a suitably steely grey day in June. The site manager paused to take a call, "yeah I'll be over in half an hour, we're just conducting a burial", he quipped.

In Chinese medicine, the metal element is associated with grief and sadness. The preparation of the burial site on an industrial hinterland was suitably solemn, watched on by a slow rumbling procession of JCB vehicles. Laid to rest, the steels became as a hole within the hole of the earth, a surreal cut-out of the sky above.

It was a particularly dry summer. The sub-contractor team mass-irrigated the entire site to stop the soil solidifying beyond a moveable state, and to keep any plants alive. As part of this slightly surreal faux-micro-climate, the steels were watered a few times a week, and fenced off incase of accidental excavation by another contractor team.

03 Unearthing

One month later, we met again to excavate. Every time I return to a site to retrieve one of the steel pieces, I'm always filled with a simultaneous rush of adventure and trepidation. What if nothing's happened? What if we it's too late and left them too long? What if this tired broken soil has nothing left to say to us? Although I haven't been physically working on this construction site for the last month, a part of me has been lying here caked in earth with the steels.

It's a hot bright day, and the arched smiles of the site team humour my insistence that we use brushes not spades in-case we deface the surfaces. It takes a while to find them, even though we know exactly where they are. The site manager's phone rings, "yeah gimme an hour, we're on an archaeological dig".

The printmaking process opens itself to chance. Circumstantially, two of the plates emerged completely rusted and the other two hardly at all. Despite my having pre-treated them in exactly the same way, this is probably due to an oil coating during the manufacturing process.

The narratives told by each pair are quite different. As one is etched inwards, the other accumulates. As one still mirrors the sky with just small filigree hints of patina, the other takes on the properties of the earth, inundated, weighted and weary. The pairs tell their own complementary stories, equally beautiful.

Once dried, cleaned off, treated and fixed, the delicate tracings really begin to dance. Growing, blooming, transforming. Dry and heavy in places and waterlogged in others. Thick and weighted in places and sudden, fleeting in others. The negotiations between steel and soil are liquid, complex.

04 Siting

The tables sit low in the garden, your hands and feet graze the earth as you talk. Sandbags packed full of soil form low-fi cushions. The tables move around the garden with the conversations they host. Sometimes contained within the enclosure of soil stocked up high. Sometimes sunken into the grassy foreshore.

Rusty and much much older than their years, in some lights they blend in to the earth and are almost forgotten, in others they blink and flash vividly with light, in Morse Code dialogue with the gleaming waters of The Thames.