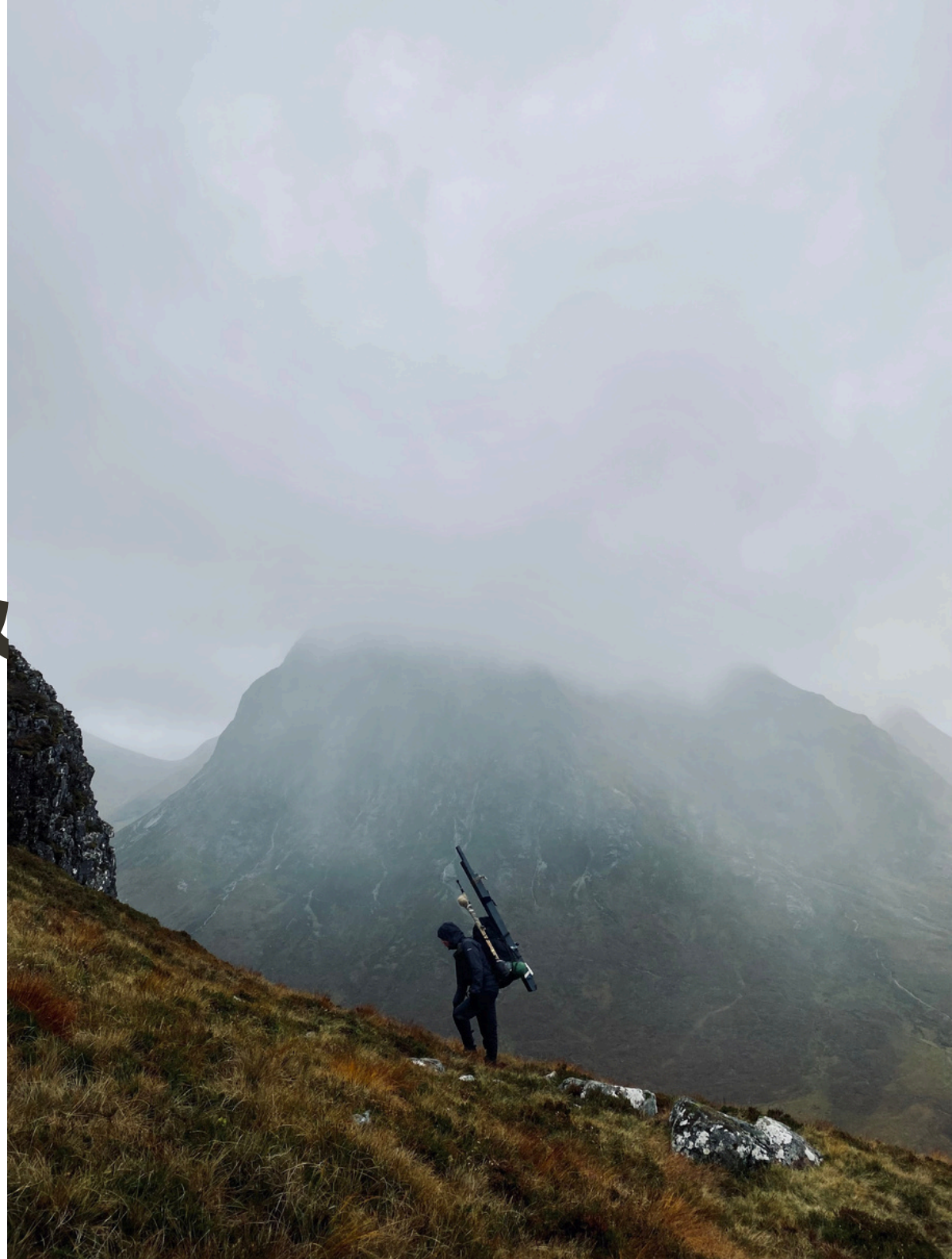


07/2024

Merits World - Paper

ON THE RHYTHM OF THE MOUNTAIN & OTHER PERFORMANCES

image by
Ewelina Czarnota



A CONVERSATION
BETWEEN
NISHA MERIT &
JONATHAN FREEMANTLE

Our conversation started as a spontaneous inquiry into the mode of artistic work between form and performance, and continued into an exploration of solitude and the dance between once own centre and the world around us.

Jonathan Freemantle has a deeply grounded posture through which it becomes easy, almost playful, to speak about transient moments, discoveries and journeys - from magnificent summits to difficult concepts such as shame.

The artist as his artworks seem to transport a frequency; performative traces of when one stands amidst giants, balancing on uneven ground, ones own body a miniature compared to the elemental forces and the moment when the steps of ones feet and the mechanical breathing synchronise with the rhythm of nature and when one can trust that however insignificant, a part is a part.

"The beauty is that we don't really need to know who we are. We are just dancing in this kind of joyful delight" as Jonathan will say later on is one core aspect I see in his art - a practice of mark making and a composing of said transience into tangible stories.

Nisha Merit is an independent curator
based between Johannesburg and Berlin.

NM

Standing amidst your current exhibition *The Fallen Tree*, we were just reminiscing about a previous installation of yours [*Spirit Matter (XIII)*], that explored the canvas as freeform in space, and I am wondering how it was for you to work with the unframed instead of the framed canvas you have been working with previously and currently.

JF

It is a kind of excitement and anxiety I have about releasing a painting from its formal structure of the stretcher and the frame towards it becoming a part of the structure of the building. As I grow more interested in the space that the works inhabit I find ways to sculpt that space. And even though I often have an idea of the work's destination, how it should be seen, I focus more on my own body and unravelling the tensions of shame that otherwise stops you from fully opening yourself, being completely vulnerable. So that the body becomes an empty vessel and the performance of making the work is the main thing. However the work ends up being shown, it becomes a remnant of the performance. I look at artists like Pina Bausch [who was a German dancer and choreographer] or Joseph Beuys [who was a conceptual German artist] who has influenced me probably the most over the past years. Not so much the work itself, but his passion for nature and the way he went into nature rather than standing separate from it is what resonates with me.

**Dissolving that line between my body and nature
is what interests me at the moment.**

I will be sleeping alone in forests and climbing mountains often through a kind of voluntary suffering, carrying paintings up the mountain or smashing rocks on the top of the mountain rather than being in my cosy studio. And even there, there's that element of performance and ritual which becomes part of taking the canvas away from the wall.



image by Jonathan Freemantle

NM

I want to look deeper into the aspects of the mountain and nature, because it feels your art or your creativity is birthed from that and there is an intriguing source you seem to immerse yourself in. But before we go into that, I want to look at your reference to Beuys and the idea of using the canvas beyond the frame or being open to having a more installation-esque relationship.

JF

I think the reason is that Beuys works are not intended as artworks but more a detritus that came as the result of an investigation or performance. He is like a shaman who uses the context of performance or a lecture as a way to unlock a new understanding of something. His "performances" appear to be more like portals through which we lose our framework of thinking and find something new. Something that drew me into his work first was his use of Celtic mythological references and the folklore of the forest.

He's really a storyteller.

When I was around 18, studying in London my father, who is also an artist, was slightly anxious about my path, and he asked me, *Are you sure you are an artist?* I said, *I don't see myself as an artist, I see myself as a storyteller.* And the story I want to tell is one that brings one back to nature, like our own true nature and also the realm of nature. My hero, mentor, now friend Richard Demarco [a Scottish artist and founder of the Traverse Theatre and the Damarco Gallery] in Edinburgh was the first to give Beuys a show in the UK. They were close friends and so in a way Beuys and Richard are the same being for me. When Beuys first came to Scotland, he said, *I don't want to see any museums or art, I want to go to the land of Macbeth* [a tragedy by William Shakespeare. It is thought to have been first performed in 1606, situated in Scotland].

So Richard took him into the Highlands on this road trip. At one point they stopped the car and Beuys had this lump of fat. It was like lard which he tossed up and down and then buried in Rannoch Moor.

**I don't think he was anti-art.
He was for nature.**

NM

Looking closer into the aspect of nature and what you just mentioned, that you go through quite a lot of hardship, physical, strenuous moments of going up a mountain with all your materials and also nature being quite unpredictable, especially in the mountains when you're high up, weather changes, everything can happen. In a way you are exposed to that. But then you're also immersed in everything that surrounds you, you often use stone pigments for example. So it feels like this relationship becomes an extension of your practice. And you mentioned ritual earlier, please walk me through the journey of going, being and making and how that relationship between yourself and the mountain unfolds.

JF

It's a yearning for an ecstatic immersion in nature and knowing - through experience - how disappointing it is when you don't dive in deeply. I need to be out there. Generally, I'll find a place, like a mountain that I will keep returning to. One example is when I first went into the Scottish Highlands, Richard Demarco gave me a photograph of Beuys in a field somewhere and said, *you have to find that place*. Without any geographical signifiers, I didn't find it. They all looked the same, but I did find 'my mountain'. When I came back to Edinburgh and told Richard about 'my mountain' his eyes sparkled and he said, *it's the same place!* So I went back to spend time there. I'll go and sleep, bring my tent, and try to climb it. It's often better when I'm unsuccessful. I tried to climb that mountain three times and failed.

Blizzards, rain.



The Fallen Tree at Gallery MOMO, images by Brett Rubin

I climbed the wrong mountain once. So it sort of builds the more it becomes elusive, the more that magnetic pull is there. While it started as a more tame process - going to the mountain, collecting rocks, bringing them back to the studio, smashing them up... But every time there's a separation from the experience, it's not quite it. I have to go to the place and make the painting on top of the mountain, which means I have to carry everything up, which means the backpack is really heavy. And it's Scotland, the weather is generally terrible in the most wonderful way.

NM

It's wild.

JF

Wild is the right word, actually, because that's one of the things that I'm summoning. I often feel sheathed and insulated as a contemporary human. I crave for the experience before words, before knowledge, before a manifestation of the human.

There's this hum.

These experiences, usually because of this conscious voluntary suffering, are almost like religious experiences where you go with a sense of devotion - *I'm going to do this no matter what*. And you're broken apart by it. But through that experience, there's this incredible transformation. I had this profound feeling that previous times walking in the mountain and on a good day, with a light backpack, the mountain is an adversary, *you against the mountain*. But having taken on so much extra weight, the mountain became a friend and I felt held and carried by it.

That experience is what I crave.

Art is the language I feel most familiar with, more than speaking, making marks on a surface or removing substance from a tree to reveal a form. That physical

language is one that comes closest to how my soul speaks. And that's how I started to be more aware of my own body.

NM

This connects back to the performativity, the way you work, which is not just the movement of your hand, but it's your whole body. I imagine that in the mountains, you also stand on uneven, less solid ground - do your movements and brushstrokes respond to that?

Further, there seems to be a transcendence in terms of the journey but then there's also a deep consciousness of your body in space, very much being in the here-and-now. I really like that dynamic between that active moment and a sort of reclusion. Silence can be daunting because now suddenly you are confronted with yourself that is otherwise rare in a hyper connected and animated world. How is that for you?

JF

Yes, that's really well put and with uneven ground we associate that someone might fall, it's risky, but if you are in the rhythm of your environment, then it's more a moment of dancing - it forces you out of a habitual shaped pattern. One big part of this process is inviting chaos into the experience, embracing a dynamic and volatile environment that is different. My studio on the other hand is incredibly ordered, more like a laboratory.

It has grown.

I mean, now I yearn for it.

I adore silence.

My parents introduced us to meditation from a young age and it became one of the things in my toolkit. But last year at a 7 month residency where I was alone Monday to Friday in the middle of the Scottish wild it deepened into a craving.



It's like dipping into a reservoir of cool water and in that space I feel completely clear and safe and at home. I feel the same when I'm in a forest alone which is harder to do in an environment with other humans.

Three or four years ago I decided to interrogate my relationship to nature - is it really me or do I just like the idea of it? I went to a forest up a mountain in Scotland and took a lot of mushrooms, too much. And immediately felt like I had messed up and all of those claustrophobic thoughts came in and I knew I needed to go for a walk, so I went up a mountain and down into the valley where I bumped into a guy on a bicycle, and told him the whole story. He was about my age, also a father to younger kids and he said, oh my god, I'm so happy for you. I wish I could do that. Can I walk with you for a little bit just to get some of your vibe? And as we summited the mountain, there's this giant full moon rising and we both just laughed. When I got back to my tent in the forest it was dark. Normally I would have crowded that experience with something and broken the silence in the dark but I had this deep experience of the forest protecting me, being an ally, not a foe. That's the moment when this feeling of being one with nature rather than experiencing nature settled fully. Since then all the unfolding of my practice and the way of embracing silence and meditation, all stems from that kind of relief of finding my own inner nature and knowing in my body that everything is connected, there's no edge or line between myself and the universe - we really are just one singularity.

NM

At the beginning of our conversation you mentioned shame. A word I think most people shy away from but you said it with such confidence and gentleness...

JF

It's a powerful word.

I know that it is the right word, because we dance around it and call it other things and still, shame is a strange word to associate with oneself. Through a kind of societal progression or whatever things we think we have to do, we gather these layers of shame. Thinking about childhood, when you're this magical young being with no consciousness of what's impossible, you live in a kind of divine union. Completely in the present, the world is your oyster. I had an amazing childhood, an amazing introduction to life. Nevertheless, we adopt this shame about what we really want, who we really are. We cover our true nature with a name and a personality and an ego, and we try to fit everything into that thing which had no shape into a shape. And shame is the word, because the effect of that word feels like what it feels to compromise that sweet openness. It is sharp and useful, because invoking shame helps to peel it away. And my experience, particularly recently, with this sense of the divine, is closest to how I felt as a seven-year-old. It's a true experience of a profound openness. I consciously work on that every day, it helps me soften my presence on the planet.

It's not so much mental shame.

It's a physical feeling.

I think we are too obsessed in a strange way with the superego, where your success is associated with your ego. Our confidence, so well manicured on Instagram, so strong and assertive, has become an empty shell. The beauty is that we don't really need to know who we are. We are just dancing in this kind of joyful delight.

NM

We just 'travelled' to the Scottish Highlands, talking about your practice while we are physically sitting here in Joburg at your exhibition *The Fallen Tree*.



images by Jonathan Freemantle

You were born in Cape Town, lived in Johannesburg, now in Scotland where you also produced these works. Thinking of you being very conscious of where you are, on which ground you stand on and how the ground informs your work, can you respond to that?

JF

I feel very at home.

I left Cape Town and when I found Scotland, I felt like this is a place that I can grow in. It was where I rediscovered that feeling I had when climbing mountains in South Africa as a kid with my dad. And carving this tree in Scotland, making these sculptures and carrying them in my suitcase - basically flying with a tree in my luggage to Johannesburg.

I love that.

I love the absurdity of it, like a story by Monty Python [were a British comedy troupe formed in 1969]. The realm of art is surreal in a comedic way. Everyone is checking in their bags with their important things, and I was checking in a tree, I find that quite joyful. I also felt quite emotional when unpacking it and placing this tree in a new environment. Alfie said, you've brought a Scottish tree to speak to the trees of Africa. It's that language that feeds me. There lies magic in repeating a journey, growing and coming back, finding yourself in the same place but having changed and finding the resonance of your experience of that place, the wavelengths have shifted.

My spirit animal was an albatross.

I like to be an outsider.

I feel more comfortable not being from a place.

NM

The Fallen Tree. Please tell me a bit more about this specific exhibition and the materiality that lies between sculpture and painting which both meet in the performative act, the traces of your movements on paint and wood.

JF

These works were made on residency with the Hugo Burge Foundation in the Scottish Borders where I spent autumn and winter 2023-2024. For both the paintings and the sculptures in the show, the main instrument was something that was very hard to control and a little bit clumsy and big. The sculptures were carved mostly with a chainsaw and the paintings were made with these two huge brushes I made from a large wig. These instruments are both somewhat beyond my control and they force me to be in a state of hyper-presentness but also allow me to let go of full control. It becomes a collaboration with the tool itself and my body and also the push and pull of how much the tool has its own language.

I didn't intend to start carving.

I wanted to broaden my colour palette so every day I would go for a run and come back clutching a branch or a stick or a leaf and would mix that colour precisely. After the first month I had developed a colour library, a new range of colours; all browns and blacks and oranges and reds and it was around that time I was burning logs in the fireplace and I just started carving some of them. Small maquettes at first. I started to deeply dive into this place, dissolve into the landscape and there was a tree that had blown over in a storm. I started experimenting with a chainsaw and very quickly it just felt right like this is a language that I know but have never physically practised. Although I didn't really have a clear idea of what the show was going to look like until about a month before coming here, the work happened at such a rate. I was carving until the day before I had to pack it up, I hadn't even seen it fully composed in the studio so it was more about going into an unknown space and letting the environment I was in work through me. All of the work is deeply connected to the landscape, my body, the multi sensory experience of being deeply involved in the experience of being absorbed by nature. Working outside, the Scottish winter brought a kind of wildness into the process, it was very powerful.



images by Ewelina Czarnota