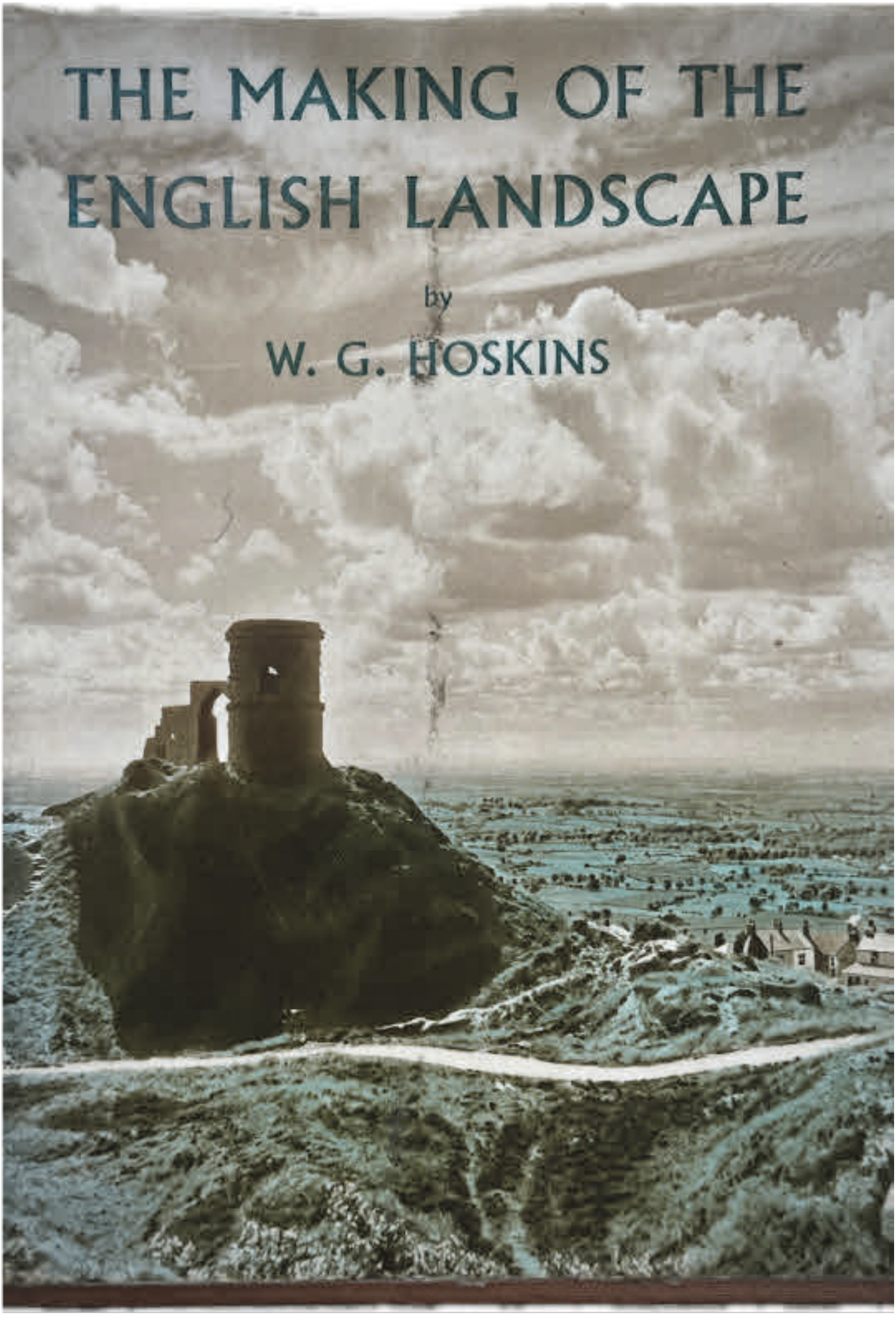
THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH LANDSCAPE

by

W. G. HOSKINS



HERE I STAND: A VIEW OF LAND.

by John-Paul Stonard

TOWARDS THE BEGINNING of his classic book The Making of the English Landscape, W.G. Hoskins describes the English landscape as an 'architectural mass of sound', a symphonic whole composed of subtle variations on a set of themes, and intertwining harmonies.

It is a good metaphor, bring out all those peculiarities of regional landscapes, hedges, field shapes, road courses, building materials, and how together they form the undulating, varying whole of England. These elements are part of what constitutes a land defined not by political borders, but by what it actually looks like, and how it has changed.

This changing appearance is always a matter of individual perspective, of the point of view from which we consider the landscape. Seeing the land means being within it. Understanding the detail — the square inch of an ordnance survey map — is the key to the whole. This idea of perspective, of where we stand, holding in our minds both the overview of a map and the actual detail of territory, can guide us around the works of art on view in Land, curated by Clare Palmier.

It is a position, or a problem, brought out in two short films playing on the same reel: S.E. Barnet's Tractor Duet — A Land Drawing (2024), in which the artist uses a tractor and a performer to draw in a landscape, and Maria Prowskoska's absorbing film of milling flour in a gallery, a performance turning the smallest elements of the landscape, grains, into something smaller still.

Time after time we are drawn into the landscape. Mahal de Man's wall drawing Eddy (2025) enlarges the image of a piece of flint with a perfect hagstone hole, pulling us in like a vortex. Zoe Benbow's paintings of woodlands, including Loughrigg Fell in the Lake District, evoke our sense of being 'within' a landscape as a matter of patches of light and shade, and of tone and hue — an abstract feeling, rather than recognisable landmarks or plants. Delving still further in, Barbara Nicholls' large watercolours Igneous Intrusion and Magma Acqua appear like cross sections of minerals, taking us into the impenetrable core of nature, the very heart of what might constitute a land, the rock on which the human world is built.

'There are certain sheets of the one-inch Ordnance Survey maps which one can sit down with and read like a book for an hour on end', W.G. Hoskins writes of those old maps, nowadays little good for navigation, created in the days before the arterial roads and motorways that are the enclosures of own age. Wilderness is the opposite of land, in this sense, unreadable, requiring a different form of mapping. Jane Watt's Flora Spectrum of Orford Ness (2025), offers a colour spectrum of plants found on the desolate shingle spit once used for bomb testing. Common vetch, Scarlet pimpernel, Forgot-me-not, the colours a map of that familiar scale of purples and greens that for some reason make up the photosynthetic colour world of plants. It is an immersion that brings us back to the paintings of Zoe Benbow, with their flickering hues, everything close to the surface, lost in itself. The point is proved, in a way, by Jane Watt's elaboration of this colour research into a set of colour swatches, Research Art Lab Camouflage Colour Palette, Orford Ness, what could be more immersive, than the cryptic coloration of camouflage?

The human world, land in the sense of something owned and developed, comes across in all its frailty. 'Civili-sation is a coat of paint that comes off in the rain', as Rodin once said. Mark Darbyshire's three paintings Just When You Look the Other Way suggest the inescapability of the human presence in thelandscape.

Everywhere we go, nowadays, we find ourselves, in a fully-humanised, denatured environment. You can get lost in the forest, Alexander Costello suggests, with a mountain of cardboard that might be landfill, or space-fill, or an image of the instability of our terrible and tragic lives as consumers, so that (to complete the title), more often, You can get lost playing ping-pong (2025). This frailty comes across whenever the idea of land takes on all-too-human features. Aileen Kelly's sculpture Unwanted Attention (2022) stands nearby, a rickety tower of rubble and vanity, ready to topple and crash at the slightest tremor in the earth beneath.

The all-too-human extreme is defined in Land by paintings made by Gary Hume. They are unquestionably images of nature — a bird, a river, a swan — but in their physical appearance, glossy, synthetic, undifferentiated areas of colour, seem the very opposite of nature, worryingly unbreathable, claustrophobically anti-natural. In our peregrination through Land we quickly reach an idea of ruination, and the great theme of landscape in our own time, that of wasteland and wilderness, of ruin and salvage.

A bird pokes its head from a pile of bricks, a perky fetish of a pink beak emerging from a fur ring. Rebecca Riess's small sculpture THE GRAVITY (2025) sets the tone for this theme of salvage, of recrudescence. The word fits

well the sculptures of Lee Grandjean, his leaf-green Forest (2024) like a tree made from cement rising in some barren wasteland. Jane Morter's post-like sculptures, totems made from recycled cardboard are equally at home in this landscape of waste from which small hopes grow, like sculptural foliage. Here also appear Aileen Kelly's uncategorisable objects, each one made as if arising from the ruins of art itself. Phantasm (2025) presents a wooden panel scarred and marked by bird's feet and scratches of gold, the remnant of some unseen moment, some action, a residue of time, increate as nature, a thing given, not made.

Wasteland. Another type of land, with its famous fragments shored against ruin, and mysterious death, undoing so many. Two dark grey ceramic cylinders, the work of Richard Oliver, appear like spent military equipment, mortar cases, abandoned in one of the old military bases across the East Anglian landscape. Nearby, Oliver's Shattered Ascent, an inverted figure made from foam and wax, might be a hornet's nest clustered on some neglected accoutrement of war. Wasteland is land degree zero, land taken back to the point before it becomes wilderness again — that common land and waste land that, in W.G. Hoskins' day (the 1950s) made up some five million acres in England and Wales (the figure today is now just over one million). It is fertile ground for poetry, as T.S. Eliot well knew, that world, as Hoskins puts it, where 'the buildings were tumbled and weed-grown, the fields gone back to heath and scrub'. Like remnants of the departed Romans, we stumble across the fragmentary inscriptions planted in a garden by Neil Hanger: Furrows Cut, Shadows Cast, Secrets Kept, and then Beaten Ground, Scored Pieces Missing. Clues without a solution that make us wonder how the land might have appeared in another day, before the veneer of civilisation was washed away and the stones crumbled to become nature once again.

What arises from these ruins, this waste, is the true story of land. It is story all the more human for being cobbled together, with flashes of beauty, but shot through with frailty and the improvisation of salvage. It is an older idea of land, a pre-industrial evoked by W.G. Hoskins with a line from Eric Gill. '...a hand-made world throughout, a slow world, a world without power, a world in which all things were made one by one...'

Telfer Stokes's sculptures, welded assemblages of richly coloured steel elements, appear as moments of salvage, scrapyard inspirations beginning to make sense to the chaos of ruin. Hunting (2024) runs the title of one, a crumpled sheet of steel animated by two bars and a box like stand. Hunting defined our relation to the land throughout history. Now we hunt in salvage yards and in promising dumps, with a mind not to kill but to repurpose. Stokes's assemblages are fleeting moments of vision, improvisations: Passing By (2024) balances four steel elements, three bars and a box, with a spirit, suggested by the title, of those combinations of sticks and stones we discover walking in the woods, or left on the beach at the end of the day.

That fleeting quality — landscape as something we pass through — appears also in Helen Rousseau's A Passing II (2025), cut out shapes mounted on floristry foam, like sliding state scenery, or objects seen from a fast-moving vehicle, rabbits or clouds, invitations for imaginative projection. Lee Grandjean's Still Life (1974-76), a wall-mounted relief of roughly coloured shapes with the patina of ruin is one of these moments of salvage that has taken flight, escaping projection and rising tides alike.

This world of collage from ruins is given some anchor in time by Noriko Okaku, in her film and accompanying collages The Interpreter which so deftly evokes the heritage of Surrealism, itself an evocation of the world of nineteenth-century engraved illustrations in the work, for instance, of Max Ernst. We are fully transformed, translated, having taken wing on a cobbled-together sculpture, and in a different landscape — a mindscape, perhaps, one full of delight and mystery, a dreamworld wilderness in which we might feel like baffled pioneer settlers. The bafflement carries into playful oil pastel drawings by Susan Kester of beach scenes, full of Surrealist animation and a delightful feeling of privacy, of unguarded thought.
Bafflement and delight are part of a new story of land, an alternative perhaps to what W.G. Hoskins calls the 'acid fingers of the twentieth century', one of the most unproductive centuries for images of the natural environment, it might be suggested. With a heightened sense of threat, of the extinguishing of our lives in nature, we have discovered a new enchantment in the lands in which we move and live. Liz Waugh McManus's small panes of coloured glass appear like slides encasing and microscopic elements, going further still than milled grain, broken stone, into the atomic heart of things. Zoom out again and that atomic heart is given a different perspective in Les Bicknell's image showing what appears to be a nuclear power station with organic roots stretching into the dark earth, and models of what might be nuclear facilities, held with care in outstretched hands. How much the laying to waste of our land brings out the sense of care, the pain of loss, of nostalgia, but also the challenge of care, of ever-dawning responsibility.

Preserving memories of land is the purpose of W.G. Hoskins' The Making of the English Landscape — only through such preservation can we gauge what has changed. Sally Hampson's beguiling sepia photographs appear to show places around Ireland, but both the image and title are not anchored in any particular place. In the roseate glow of memory places are always stories, and stories are what will survive us. Bothan, a remote bothy, Ellis Wood, Connemaram, co, Kerry shows a simple shepherd's shelter lost in the leaves; other photographs, from the swiftness of a shutter click, preserve the sense of countryside as a place of ancient, slow endurance. Graham Crowley creates a similar feeling in his duotone paintings, given tone and depth by the oily striations of paint on a smooth primed panel, showing imaginary landscapes, titled with the time it took to make them — 4 Hours 9 Minutes (2025), as if drawing attention to the negligible time to create something that might last for decades, centuries — or simply however much time before the world is just weather again, and human life has dwindled to prehistoric communities.

Hampson's photographs are also weathered, like the surfaces of Aileen Kelly's reliefs and sculptures, or the assemblages of Telfer Stokes, a weathering that defines the land more than any other aspect, a feeling of silence and emptiness. 'The most striking aspect of the English landscape at the beginning of the sixteenth century', Hoskins writes, 'was that there were three sheep to every human being'.

It is what we do best in the land — walk and discover, eyes open, so that a strangely-shaped stick, forming a near-perfect right angle, catches the attention and becomes part of the enchanting idea, emerging from the mind of Jevan Watkins-Jones, of a museum of such objects — The Stick Museum (2025). It is elemental, like the work of Aileen Kelly, art before art — such a stick would surely have fired the same curiosity in the mind of our earliest ancestors. Their perspective was just as unique as our own. And so we walk in the land, gathering fragments, looking, thinking, aided, as we go further afield, by the memorable generosity of Matt Hale, whose Freedom Walking Sticks might accompany us into the wildest terrains. And time after time we are drawn to the edges of the land, to the coastal regions where we can take its measure of things, and also begin to understand its current plight, the crumbling of the fringes, the falling of that veneer of civilisation into the rising tide. It is an existential threat that seems so often

beyond the metaphors of art. Mahal de Man's Doggerland Remains: Suffolk — Zeeland (2025), shows two careful pencil drawings of stone tools recovered, we might assume from the land bridge between Britain and the continent that was submerged so many thousands of years ago — a land which we can now traverse only in our imagination.

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