

Louise Wheeler

The Line on the Horizon

The artists Kurt Jackson (b. 1961) and Laura Knight (1877-1970) have made art in different centuries and societies. However, their shared love of the sea, and their subsequent paintings which incorporate the lines of the sea's horizon, unite their works as the embodiment of a feeling for place.

From a privileged view, a drone camera circulates above the Cornish coastline on a brightly lit day. It captures the relenting sea, which breaks and folds in white crests upon the rocky shoreline. Into this rolling surf advances a surfer, equipped in a wetsuit, and board under arm. From the craggy coast, the artist Kurt Jackson watches his friend disappear into the blue. With him he has carried a large board, on which is his paper. As his friend begins to surf, Jackson corresponds with rapid pencil and pen marks onto the paper. He hurriedly adds watercolour washes, combined with acrylic inks, flicking his paint and allowing it to run. There is no easel, the board is exposed to the elements of the sea, as much as Jackson himself. The artist uses the rocks as a support, before the sea itself billows in its waves, and narrowly, the whole picture is nearly submerged, but Jackson moves it in time. Eventually, the tide subsumes Jackson and he is forced into a retreat onto higher rocks. The sea is rushing around his feet, yet board at mid-height he continues his creation. The sea is an integral part of this artist's practice.

Kurt Jackson read zoology at Oxford University. From his childhood he had a close connection to the natural world, found in his habit of painting from specimens and then annotating them. However, it wasn't until taking a gap year in Africa that Jackson decided he wanted to be an artist, and that to pursue this he wanted to be in Cornwall. He first moved to Boscastle in 1984, where he began to develop as a painter; he still lives in Cornwall, in St Just. Jackson has painted landscapes across Britain, but it is Cornwall which has been fundamental to his approach. Indeed, he has produced several series from the topography of the West Cornish coast, including from Cape Cornwall and Priest Cove, to his latest exhibition *Cot: A Cornish Valley* at his gallery space, the Jackson Foundation in St Just. Jackson has stated that he has to have a connection to a place in order to paint it, and he has returned to the same environments repeatedly in order to continue searching for new perspectives. Jackson works within and from the landscape *en plein air* as the drone video footage from his website affirms, yet he also works from sketches back in his studio.

Jackson's willingness to experiment has resulted in his use of multiple media, as well as the use of found objects and materials to build up the picture surface, from newspaper to sand. The process of understanding a landscape manifests in Jackson's process of painting, and it is this process which is inherently abstract and dynamic, with Jackson using multiple brushes and media in any one moment. His process is as much a part of the work as the finished piece; for large works, Jackson works from the ground and engages such techniques as utilising the palette itself to wipe paint across the surface, as well as pouring paint directly. Yet, his finished paintings convey a realism that is at odds with their abstracted beginnings.

Kurt Jackson, *Winter Solstice*, 2017, mixed media on collage, 122x122 cm, Private Collection.

https://messums.com/artworks/view/55403/Winter_solstice

Jackson's process suggests the rhythm of the sea, dynamic but also methodical. The lines of his seascape horizons convey a magnitude reminiscent of the sublime; frequently Jackson's depiction of a landscape serves to remind of the microscopic presence of humans within it; how humanity has changed the landscape, yet can never fully control it. This is a theme he has explored in accompanying trawler and fishermen out to sea on their boats: as they work against the power of the sea, Jackson draws and paints their perilous, hard task. In doing this,

Jackson emphasises the interaction between humanity and landscape, ultimately showing the importance of respect deserved to both.

Kurt Jackson, *A Night Full of Sardines*, 2013, mixed media on paper, 25x24 cm.

<http://www.kurtjackson.com/Line-caught-and-local-2014.html>

This aspect of man's interaction with the sea is also depicted in the early work of Laura Knight, an artist unrelated to Jackson in terms of style, but of whom nevertheless displayed an affinity to the sea, as well as to Cornwall. Her paintings of Staithes in Yorkshire, an artists' colony in the late nineteenth century, included depictions of the fishing crews and their workers. Knight conveys the sense of dependence upon the sea for the Staithes community in *The Fishing Fleet*, as well as a mood of determination.

Laura Knight, *The Fishing Fleet*, 1900, oil on canvas, 123x84 cm, Bolton Museum and Art Gallery.
<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-fishing-fleet-163691#image-use>

Knight had a difficult childhood, marred by poverty, the absence of her father, and the death of her sister. However, she was encouraged to paint and draw by her mother, Charlotte, who as an artist, taught at her daughter's school in exchange for free education. Her talent enabled her to attend the Nottingham School of Art, aged just thirteen. It was there that she met fellow artist Harold Knight, who she would try to emulate in technique and style, and of whom became her husband in 1903. Whilst living in the artists' colony in Staithes, Knight came under the guidance of Charles Hodge Mackie (1862-1920), who helped her to develop her style by depicting what she observed and not imitating other artists. The escape to Staithes reflected an emergence in late nineteenth century art of a rejection of academicism, following the influence of the French Barbizon and Dutch Hague schools; a shift towards depictions of rural people and life, and the creation of artistic centres within these rural communities. Knight's focus is towards the reality of working people in Staithes. Yet, in 1907, the Knights felt the need to move to another influential artists' colony, Newlyn in Cornwall. The couple would live in Cornwall for ten years, and become active within the Newlyn School, surrounded by artists such as Stanhope Forbes (1857-1947), and Alfred

Munnings (1878-1959). The atmosphere of Newlyn, and the infamous Cornish light enabled Knight's palette to become brighter, with her work becoming more optimistic or romantic than in her work at Staithes.

Laura Knight, *On the Cliffs*, 1917, oil on canvas, 63.5x76cm, Sotheby's.

<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.85.html/2009/victorian-edwardian-art-109688>

In Knight's *On the Cliffs* the sea is presented through a human presence of the two women on the cliff top. This presentation of figures against a backdrop of the sea's distant horizon re-occurs in Knight's Cornish works, suggesting a concern for a connection between the human and the landscape. Indeed, Knight's Cornish years were an idyllic escape for her in her life and work. However, the developments of World War I eventually forced the Knights back to London by 1919; depictions of the British coastline were banned by the government in an act of censorship, which limited Knight's access to painting the sea.

Both Kurt Jackson and Laura Knight at first appear to be two very different artists. Yet their shared inspiration from the landscape, particularly the terrain and coastline of Cornwall, displays a concern for a sense of place and the human presence within an environment. Their depictions of the sea remind of the power of nature to transcend the mundanities of life, and as such their horizons invite the viewer, like the surfer, into the rhythm of the tide.

Laura Knight, *Wind and Sun*, 1913, watercolour with bodycolour over pencil on linen, 96.5x112 cm, Sotheby's.

<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2009/victorian-edwardian-art-109687/lot.69.html.html>

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