



# Unearthed

ART AND SKRAN

Ethnography from Shetland's oil era

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*Berenice Carrington*

# Unearthed

THROUGHOUT THE SHORT SHETLAND SUMMER OF 2012 I WAS AN ARTIST IN RESIDENCE IN SCALLOWAY, THE OLDER CAPITAL OF BRITAIN'S NORTHERN ISLES. DURING THREE MONTHS' FIELDWORK I HUNTED DOWN FABLED RELICS THAT COMPRISE THE UNACKNOWLEDGED LEGACY FROM SHETLAND'S AFFAIR WITH THE GIANT OIL INDUSTRY, UNCOVERING A WEALTH OF WORKADAY OBJECTS WHICH HAD BEEN MOULDED BY AN ANCIENT TRADITION OF SALVAGE AND ABSORBED INTO LOCAL CULTURE.

Cover left: 'Coarn Skroos'

c.1995

Cover right: Sullom Voe

Terminal 1980



*Unearthed* is the culmination of three-years' ethnographic study of these objects and their provenance; artefacts and mementos of the period constitute its narrative with a text of original drawings and linocuts that are factual and coloured by metaphor.

• *Transport Routes Scotland to*  
• *Shetland,*  
• *2012*  
• *20 x 11 cm*  
• *scraper board*



In the 1970s and early 1980s the Shetland Isles became a temporary home to a force of around five thousand construction workers, brought to the islands to build Europe's largest oil terminal

near Callback Ness on the shores of Sullom Voe. Two pre-fabricated accommodation camps for these men were shipped in and erected at Firth and Toft, just over the hill from Sullom Voe.

• *Swan Maidens over Toft Camp*  
• 1978, 2013, 46 x 61 cm,  
• charcoal on paper

Each camp was equipped with an array of bars and social facilities; it seemed as if no expense was spared in catering for the tastes and comforts of this huge workforce. The recreation centres were regularly transformed into nightclubs, which boasted the cream of cabaret acts. But to phlegmatic Shetlanders who held day jobs at the camps, the extent of the oil industry's extravagance could be better gauged by the quality and condition of herring gulls living out of the waste-food skips from the camps.

It was a time when the old ways changed forever.

Oil discovery and subsequent recovery is about speed and efficiency, success and excess. Among the first token gifts bestowed upon Shetland Islanders, at a time of negotiations over land acquisition and rents, were cigar cutters. For some in Shetland, those excesses were a cause for unease and the whole era a blurred picture that will not resolve itself in conventional imagery.

• *Lord Anthony Over Delting, 2013, 112 x 152 cm, charcoal on paper*  
• *Photograph: Michal Klivanek*  
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The experience is still too recent to determine how oil fits into Shetland's cultural landscape.

The Lord Anthony parka was standard issue to all Grandmet (Firth Camp) and all Taylorplan (Toft Camp) employees, although casual workers were often denied them. By the late 1970s they had become the most potent symbol of the oil companies' influence on the Shetland population, a phenomenon measurable by the number of Lord Anthonys visible on Commercial Street, Lerwick on any Saturday afternoon.

Between the 'new' housing on the north side of Firth Voe and the vod hooses (unoccupied houses) on the south are the huge pipelines from Brent and Ninian, buried under the peat, under the sand and under the sea. These giants bring North Sea oil ashore to Shetland.

The old stone croft house in the foreground of Lord Anthony Over Delting survived pipes and oil but has since been demolished and reconstructed as an adjunct to the new Shetland Gas developments.





Although the majority of employees on the site (Sullom Voe Oil Terminal) were itinerant men from Glasgow, Ireland, Newcastle and Liverpool, the Grandmet and Taylorplan companies who ran the accommodation camps at Firth and Toft employed many local people, and during the summer months took on students, who established their own village of tents at Clickimin campsite.

Teenage girls working as chambermaids at the camps could earn more money than their parents who worked in the traditional local industries of knitting, fishing and crofting. A lot more money. Many women had the opportunity to take paid work for the first time in their lives, and they took it. Homes, which had always had 'someone in' now lay empty all day long and community life became transformed.

And then it was all over. The Queen opened the oil terminal, most of the workforce went back to where they had come from and the jobs vanished.

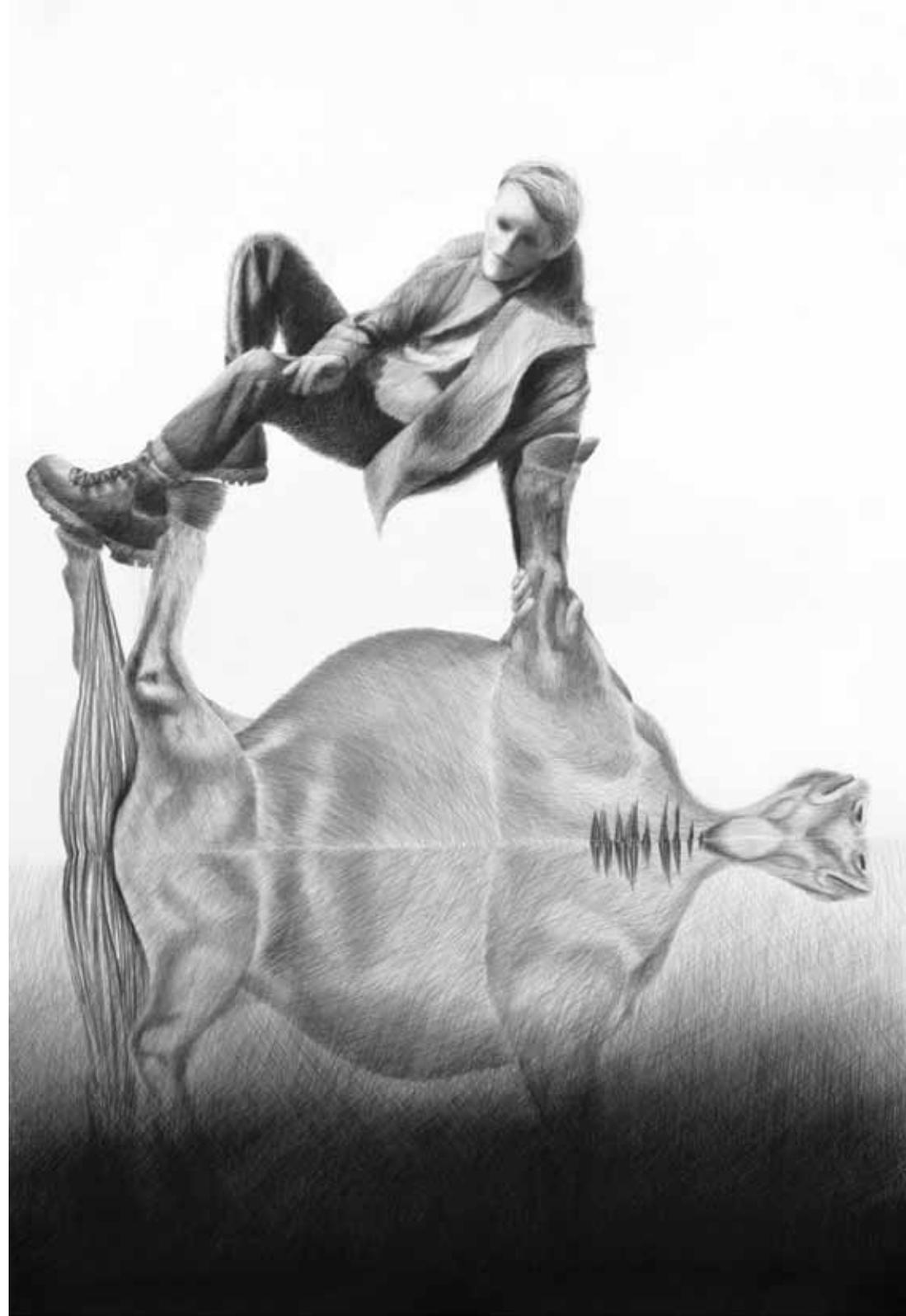
TAX CODE/PERIOD		GROSS PAY		DEDUCTIONS	
NAT. INS. No. A		BASIC PAY	59.60	INCOME TAX	0.00
ER. NAT. INS.		OVERTIME	73.20	NAT. INSURANCE	11.14
ANNUAL SALARY		ALLOW	63.00		
PENS. CONT. TO DATE		SHIFT	19.87		
HOURLY RATE		RD/TRV	41.90		
HOURS					
HOL. CR. THIS PERIOD		OTHER GROSS PAY		OTHER DEDUCTIONS	
HOL. CR. TO DATE					
ROUNDING B/F		TOTAL PAY	257.57	TOTAL DED'NS	11.14
ROUNDING C/F					
TAXABLE PAY TO DATE	TAX PAID TO DATE	NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS TO DATE		PAYMENT METHOD	NET PAY
343.98	0.00	TOTAL	EMPLOYER	CA	246.50
		51.41	16.97		

But some things remained for just a little while longer.

In the mid 1980s the two camps were demolished. George McKay Brown, the Orkney writer, once titled the peoples of the Northern Isles Fishermen with Ploughs. But they proved to be much more versatile than even he envisaged as they salvaged all manner of building materials, fixtures and fittings from the camps. They literally took everything that could be lifted.



• Top: Taylorplan Payslip 1980  
 • Above: Toft Accommodation  
 • Camp Pass 1979



*Clickimin Camper* ·  
2013 ·  
114 x 78 cm ·  
*charcoal on paper*



*Inside Out, 2014, 56 x 76 cm, charcoal on paper*



*Outside In, 2015, 56 x 76 cm, charcoal on paper*



*Handrail, 2014, 30 x 20 cm, linoprint*

Locally, this 'bounty' salvaged to be recycled is called *skran*, a word of Icelandic origin meaning rubbish or odds and ends. Oil-era skran remains in use to this day, in the homes and on the crofts of many people in the north of Shetland.

Traditionally, skranning was carried out on beaches amongst the wreckage and debris brought ashore by the sea. But no-one had ever experienced anything on the scale of the dismantling of Firth and Toft camps, and skranning became a weekend pastime for some and a daily obsession for others.



*Wardrobes, 2014, 30 x 20 cm, linoprint*

My hunt for oil-era skran turned up homes heated by camp radiators, with camp doors and camp sinks in their bathrooms. What were once stainless steel kitchen benches had been cut down to make everlasting windowsills. An intact blue plastic laundry bag at the back of a cupboard was remembered and brought out for me to admire; a Lord Anthony Snorkel Parka still existed, in pristine condition. Some skran was never put to use but survives because it gives



*Carpet Tiles, 2014, 30 x 20 cm, linoprint*

pleasure to its owner. Wilma was a young mother at the breaking of Toft camp, looking for a desk for her children's bedroom, when she came across a boldly patterned curtain. Her children may be grown up and the desk now gone, but Wilma still has the curtain.

*Everlasting Windowsill, 2012*





The inclusion of six linocuts in the exhibition adds a deeper and more intense note to the persuasive tones of pencil and charcoal, and they illustrate skran items in situ, as revealed to me by their keepers.

The Shetland pony drawings depict stories using objects that are on the brink of losing their function, meaning or place in our lives. They render likenesses that offer the viewer an unfamiliar perspective, which hopefully imbues these leftover articles with renewed value.

The Fire Extinguisher and Exit Sign were brought down from an attic and presented to me. Neither object had ever been used since its removal from Toft camp, the Exit Sign even retaining its original packaging. So many times I heard the maxim: *'Nae point in pittin somtin inta da skip da day dat we'll need da morn. Better ta dump nithin.'* The Shetland ponies are representations of an ambiguous resilience peculiar to the Isles. The incongruity of the imagery is deliberate and as inscrutable

as the elusive 'cache of toilet pans stowed to the rafters in a lambing shed' that I was told of on more than one occasion but which, alas, I never got to see.

*Right: Intact Laundry Bag*

*Below: From Now On  
2013, 56 x 76 cm  
charcoal on paper*





*From Here, 2013, 56 x 76 cm, charcoal on paper*

Good quality materials were also to be found on the dump at the oil terminal itself and some locals who worked there were enterprising enough to take a chance and seize the opportunity. For weeks Robert-a-Camb from the island of Yell gathered skran from that dump, which he then fabricated into a little boat replete with sails and oars – all constructed during working hours under the noses of his employers and in their company yard. Robert presented me with a palm-sized wood plane he'd made out of odds and ends and which he used during the building of his boat. He launched the boat from Orca Voe sailed her across Yell Sound and rowed her ashore at Cuppaster.

I was fortunate to have people share their personal collections of photographs with me, as an aid to tracing and identifying skran. My focus was largely on the background in these pictures, on the tables, curtains, carpets and buildings. But I also became engrossed in the subjects themselves, the men and

women spontaneously captured in fleeting images of a world that was temporary. The blue and pink portraits included in the exhibition are largely inspired by this tangential effect.

*Below: Robert-a-Camb's Boat, c.1984*

*Bottom: Robert-a-Camb's plane, c.1980*



Accommodation ships arrive in Lerwick for the workers employed to build a new gas plant at Sullom Voe and the cycle begins again.

I invited Yell Arts and Crafts Group to examine the similarities between what is happening in Shetland today and the oil era of the late 1970s. Some of these artists lived through the earlier experience and could use memory, but most were relatively recent incomers who relied on photographs to compare the current activities with those of the past. The group settled on photo-collage as the most suitable medium to convey their impressions, the results of which are displayed in this exhibition.

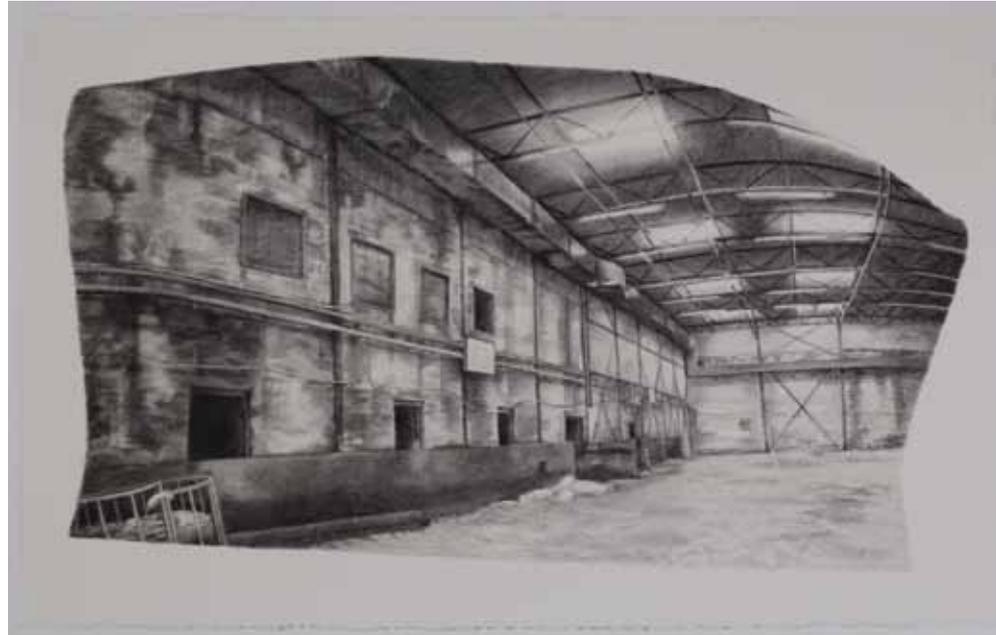
The Yell Arts and Crafts Group workshops, which I held were supported by a grant for materials from the Shetland Arts Fund.

- Above:
- *Sans Vitesse & Ocean Endeavour*
- *Lerwick, 2014*
- Below:
- *Yell Arts and Crafts Group*
- *Workshop, 2014*



An interior perspective of an erstwhile recreational facility from Firth camp illustrates a sequence of functional development from basketball courts to store house for black-bale silage feeders. Unlike all my other discoveries this 'shed' had never moved from the days of its installation.

The skran I unearthed exists in such quantities on the crofts and in the homes of Shetland folk today as a valued investment, at hand and ready to be utilised, if that day ever comes.



*Top: Firth Camp 2012*  
2015  
56 x 76 cm  
charcoal on paper

*Right: Wilma's Curtain, 2012*

*Far right: The artist at work, 2014*



*Postscript. An embryonic phase of this project was exhibited as Floating World at Format Gallery, Adelaide, Australia in March 2013*

*I would like to thank Shetland Arts and Shetland Museum and Archives for their support during my fieldwork. I am indebted to the many Shetlanders who participated in this project for their generosity with their time, stories and skran. Graphic production of Unearthed catalogue by Baden Smith, Adelaide, Australia.*