What does a sculptor do? They make things (ok, they make sculptures) from other things: from raw materials such as stone, clay, wood, steel, even pollen to ‘found’ objects like toys, crockery, scaffolding. Sculptors deal with physical, material, spatial stuff, transforming one thing into another.

The practice of sculpture is at its core an intuitive engagement with materials, an ancient instinct to mould and shape, to play with and make use of the physical stuff that is the world around us until something is created, learned or made visible. Sculpture is the world around us, reconfigured.

Gregson has been exploring the world through sculpture for the last twenty years; she describes making as a means of discovery, of knowledge production. She draws on traditional techniques and processes such as casting, carving and frottage (rubbings) as ways of accumulating knowledge -- knowledge pertaining to the nature of materials and the way they behave; knowledge about mass, volume, and spatial perception; knowledge in the form of skills and non-verbal thought; knowledge that feeds an intricate, evolving understanding of her environment.

Gregson’s practice revolves around materials: their changing states, their relationship to place, their histories and her relationship to them. Living in London, her practice has often led her mudlarking along the shores of the tidal Thames to bring strange debris back to her studio for investigation and eventual incorporation into works such as Restless Terrain (2016): a long, meandering bronze slab in which you might expect to find fossils, cast from geostatistics used to shore up the river embankment and balanced on pier-like stilts, an archaeological specimen laid out for examination. Of many of the materials that have gone into her sculptures have been abandoned, defunct or are simply no longer needed – from the tough paper sacks that powders like plaster and gypsum are sold in, to webbed fruit bags and wooden cable reels. They accumulate around her studio alongside scavenging spoils from the river and elsewhere, until they find their way into a work. Discarded materials bring a history with them and that history is often human; this has led Gregson to explore sites, like the Thames embankment and Grizedale, where an industrial past has left its mark.

Grizedale’s remote location and picturesque natural environment belle the impact of human activity in this landscape. Paved for its natural beauty, the Lake District is seen today as the antidote to urban, industrial society and yet its abundant natural resources have been exploited by industry for over four hundred years; charcoal burning and iron smelting has been going on here since prehistoric times. A boom in mining and processing industries in the sixteenth century saw a rich array of minerals being extracted from the fells: copper, zinc, lead, arsenic, diatomite, barytes, haematite (iron ore), tungsten, graphite, fluorite and coal. Slate, granite, limestone and sandstone were also quarried extensively for construction both locally and in many major cities, while corn mills, fulling mills and sawmills as well as tanneries and breweries, pencil-making, iron and gunpowder manufacturing were built close to rivers and gills to make use of the abundant natural water supply; there was massive deforestation of large swathes of the Lake District to meet demand for charcoal in the smelters and blast furnaces, timber for construction and turned wooden bobbins for the spinning and weaving industries of Lancashire, all of which made their mark on the landscape, and left a lasting legacy not only in terms of industrial archaeology but also in the geology and ecology of the region, from the adits and spoil heaps that reshaped the fell sides and the valleys that never recovered their forests, to the polluting minerals that continue to leach from old workings into the rivers and lakes.

Over the last six months, Gregson has been exploring the area around Grizedale, picking over the material evidence of this industrial past, and making work both in situ and back at her studio as a
sentries guard the mine entrances around the clock. Apart from its many uses in gunpowder, pencils and industrial lubricants, graphite also features in the production of iron and steel; it is traditionally used as a flux in the production of pig iron between a sand mould and iron castings, while white dust, Gregorion's chosen material, is a graphite-rich and less brittle form of cast iron.

Known locally as ‘wad’ amongst the Cumbrian shepherds who used to cover the sheep with it in the old frosty days, graphite forms a natural part of the landscape. It is a natural lubricant used in the practice of making, or drawing. The new, large scale drawings and frottages (rubbings) of the surfaces of milling stones, walls and textiles, also change the Park’s landscapes, offering another reminder of the iron and copper smelting industries and charcoal-fired blast furnaces of the eighteenth century.

The process of making a frottage is a simple, sensory activity that can be enjoyed by all; the touch, feel and sight of graphite is something that can be experienced on the surface beneath the paper, and vary the pressure used to apply the graphite in response, thus producing an intimate map of the object's surface. Again, the relationship between the artist and the subject; some information (such as colour) is, like the white spaces that indicate a void beneath the paper, elusive. These are drawings that speak the language of sculpture; they don’t describe light and shade but rather a tactile surface.

Gregorion is deliberately in her selection of materials, and the material richness of the Lake District is revealed in the softy contoured oak panels, sculpted by mill employees leaning in their work in the same spot, day after day. The translated textures of slate walls and polished wood conjure vast landscapes and even human figures to process the extracted ores.

Graphite was actually discovered in Borrowdale, a valley ten miles or so north of Grizedale; the geology here you a purer form of graphite, which was extracted to form pencils. In this isolated Lakeland valley became the centre of a mining operation on an industrial scale; miners from Germany were brought up to work the lucrative mines. the visit of Elizabeth I, who had armed mill workers and sense of continuity embedded in indigenous crafts such as wailing.

In terms of artistic heritage, this gesture also broaches ques- tions of ownership, and gives me the chance to come to terms with the emergence of modern industrial society in the early twentieth cen- tury, and the response of artists: embracing mechanical fabrication/ reproduction methods, chance and natural processes, problematiz- ing the notion of the ‘artistic genius’ and seeking to be more part of the close together, and promoting an ethos of ‘truth to materials’ that both borrowed from traditional artisan cultures and encouraged the exploration of new materials as part of a radical expansion of the artist’s lexicon.

A member of the post-modern generation, Gregorion is in- sistently self-conscious about her sculptural practice. But she has been able to mark the limits of the touch and the feel of graphite. What surface beneath the paper, and vary the pressure used to apply the graphite in response, thus producing an intimate map of the object's surface. Again, the relationship between the artist and the subject; some information (such as colour) is, like the white spaces that indicate a void beneath the paper, elusive. These are drawings that speak the language of sculpture; they don’t describe light and shade but rather a tactile surface.

Gregorion’s exhibition at Grizedale features in a deeper look- ing at the weaving of human activity and natural forces, and explores some of the (inherently sculptural) processes that have de- signed man’s relationship to nature in the last 500 years. It also offers ways of thinking about that relationship; her work Spectre (2019), for instance, immortals bracket fungi in porcelain. Multiple casts were made using slip-casting and press-moulding, techniques employed in the production of ears from plates to sanitaryware in the gallery. These bracket fungi — which grow like parasites on trees weakened by infection or stress, and feed on their host — usually resulting in demise – presents a disquieting metaphor for us to take away.

result of these visits. One of these new ones, Carbon Delta (2019), is a ductile iron cast of a boulder in Hob Gill, a water source close to an ancient use for graphite. Another graphite piece growing out of her double-boiler up to the gift and made a wax cast of the rock in the river, where the cold spring water would have instantly chilled the molten wax as it covered the soft contours worn by the water into the rock. The edges and shapes of graphite are something Gregorion has used extensively in her recent work, particularly with her new, large scale frottages and drawings.

As with previous cast metal sculptures, however, Gregorion is interested in the fact that there are multiple sculptural forces acting on the work. It’s the slow action of water working on the rock sur- face, and her own, self-conscious intervention in this process. She has thus carved into the cast, creating an imaginary landscape of an unknown river, that is compatible with the geography of the boulder. As a result, the work now occupies an ambiguous state, be- tween micro- and macro-scales, human and geological temporalities.

Gregorion is equally deliberate in her selection of materials, and the material richness of the Lake District is revealed in the softy contoured oak panels, sculpted by mill employees leaning in their work in the same spot, day after day. The translated textures of slate walls and polished wood conjure vast landscapes and even human figures to process the extracted ores.

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Andrea Gregson

Andrea Gregson is a London-based artist, curator and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, born in Morecambe, Lancs. From 1995 to 1997, she was awarded a Postgraduate Fellowship at the Academy of Fine Art, Warsaw, Poland and an MA Fine Art from Manchester Metropolitan University (1996). In 2016, she realised ‘Casting Space: Sculpture from the Anthropocene’ at University of East London supported by Henry Moore Foundation. She has exhibited in numerous solo and group shows at: Gasteinstaler Hoflgård, Fyn, Denmark (2017); Romantos, Athens (2017); AVA Gallery, London (2016); Patrick Heide, London (2014); Concrete, Hayward Gallery, London (2012); Torrance Art Museum, Los Angeles (2011); The Garden Museum, London (2009); Exeter Phoenix (2008); Galerie Stuker, Berlin (2009); Galerie 1816, Breteaux, France (2007); Galeria XXI, Warsaw (2005); and CCA, Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw (2000).


Dr. Lizzie Fisher

Dr. Lizzie Fisher is an independent curator and art historian who was born and now based in Cumbria. For almost two decades, she has worked with artists, curated and written extensively on contemporary artistic practice, both in the UK and USA. Recent publications include ‘On Not Knowing How Artists Think’ with Rebecca Fortnum (Black Dog Publishing, 2013) and ‘The Experimental Generation: networks of interdisciplinary practice in British art, 1950-1970’ (Interdisciplinary Science Reviews vol 42 issues 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2017). Fisher holds an MA from Bard College, New York and a PhD from the University of Cambridge. She is a Leverhulme Research Fellow at Northumbria University and her current research focuses on postwar experimental & expanded arts practice in the rural north. Previously, she was Curator of Exhibitions and Collections at Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge.
List of Work

Forestry Concentus & Back Cover
Carbon Delta [detail] 2019
Cassel iron

1 Carbon Delta 2019
Cassel iron, mirror, cable reel

2 Sawed-off 2019
Stott Park Bobbin Mill Gresky, paper

5 Tenam 2018
Bronze, birch plywood

4 Feeding for a Wolf 2019
Stoney Hazel Furnace Forge Graphite, paper

5 Specch 2019
Porcelain

6 Sawed-off [detail] 2019
Bracket fungus on coppice pole

7 Taftrick 2019
Blueberries, paint, wax

8 Flagrant Matter 2016
Bronze, birch plywood, plastic Iids

8 Reckless Terrain 2016
Bronze, wood

9 II II Tought-stone 2019
Graphite, paper, copper poles

12 Sawed-off [detail] 2019
Graphite, paper

Essay
Dr. Lizzie Fisher

Image
Andrea Gregson

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Studiot D'Catera

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Forestry England
Arts Council National Lottery Project Grant
Research Award University for the Creative Arts
Support
Stott Park Bobbin Mill, English Heritage

Andrea Gregson
Seeing Through The Ground

5th July – 31st August 2019
Ornside Forest Visitor Centre Gallery
Gresky, 2019
Aisleendale
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