

Torn by the Wind

It has been challenging to consider the theme of ‘forest’ for my work in LiLa because Shetland, where I live and work, is a largely treeless landscape, and there is no forest culture as in other northern countries. Many questions arise about this theme from a Shetland perspective.

How can we understand the idea of forest in relation to Shetland’s culture as a seafaring island community and maritime hub where seascape and landscape reveal clear sight lines, uncluttered and uncomplicated by trees or tall buildings? What does forest mean? How does it connect the cultural, ecological, social and material? What are the economic and political dimensions of the forest? How could I define ‘forest’ in the Shetland context for my work in LiLa? Could I create a ‘forest’ culture for Shetland, and would it be real or imaginary?

The definition of what constitutes a forest is complicated. It depends on various factors, such as location, who is creating the definition, their role or occupation, their values and the purpose for creating the definition (Hendriks, 2021). I considered the physical nature of the forest, as

in trees, plants and ground cover. I focused on what abounds in Shetland, including kelp forests, peatlands and flora - wildflowers, lichen, moss and fungi. I considered these in relation to a range of material uses, meanings and values: culture, health and well-being, ecology, sustainability and questions around climate change, net zero and the energy transition.

Figure 1. Studies of wildflowers in Shetland. Detail. Explorations in material uses, cultural meaning, ecological value; nutritional and medicinal use. Image: Roxane Permar, 2023.



I read many texts, and I used photography, film and audio recording to look, to see, to hear, to discover the world around me to better understand the forest and learn how to overcome my claustrophobia and fear of the forest and be able to be within it.



*Figure 2. Wayfinding in the forest, Nordingrå, Sweden.
Image: Roxane Permar, 2023.*

I imagined the idea of the forest for Shetland as a metaphor or as an image, as in a large number of vertical or tangled objects, such as the forest of sails and masts of fishing boats once visible around Shetland's natural harbours in the past or the dense mass of a newly con-

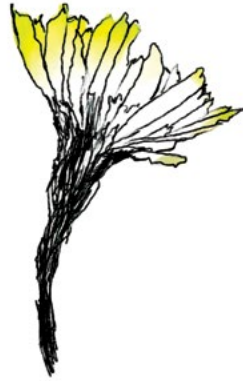
structed forest of 103 wind turbines looming over our north central mainland today.

I tracked woodlands and forests by making aerial films as I travelled by plane from Shetland to mainland Scotland and onwards to Finland. During fieldwork



*Figure 3. Sculptural studies for the Rockpool, Rotsidan, Sweden.
Image: Roxane Permar, 2023.*

in Sweden and Shetland, I made drawings and floated sculptural studies in rock pools made from litmus paper and natural materials, such as bark. Audio and film recordings enabled me to listen more deeply to the wind in the trees, a phenomenon called 'psithurism'. I brought



AUTUMN HAWKBIT
CALLED SHEPHERD'S CLOCK
BECAUSE ITS BLOOMING
FLOWERS SIGNALLED
THE TIME WHEN
SHEPHERDS SHOULD
MOVE THEIR FLOCKS
TO HIGHER PASTURES

*Figure 4. Film Still. Shetland wildlife studies, exploring cultural, ecological, medicinal and material meaning.
Image: Roxane Permar, 2023.*

together these different forms of making to create a film that employs audio and visual material I collected in Sweden alongside drawing and stop-frame animations I made in Shetland.

In my search for 'forest' in Shetland, the theme of loss, and then in turn, that of renewal, quickly emerged. It transpired that it was not only in my investigations but also in those among our group from the University of the Highlands and Islands. We all became acutely aware of the indigenous knowledge we lost through the disappearance of Scotland's ancient forests. We shared deep concern about deforestation in Scotland through the forestry industry and were shocked to learn that nearly 16 million trees were felled to construct wind farms in Scotland (Johnson, 2023).

The theme of 'loss' became the main theme in my final work, although I hope there is some optimism in it, too. This duality of loss and renewal is reflected by the word 'windling' or 'windlin' in the Shetlaen language. It is a bundle of hay, a sign of both the end and beginning,

as the hay has been harvested and then secured in a bundle for positive, productive use. In dialect, however, it can also mean something that is torn off by the wind, such as a branch of a tree, a meaning that I link with the loss we are experiencing in Shetland through wind, our rich natural resource that is being aggressively extracted for profit by large corporations from outwith Shetland, a process called extractivism (Chagnon et al., 2022).

*Figures 5 and 6. Digital drawings. Studies exploring the representation of the Viking Energy Wind Farm, 2023.
Images: Roxane Permar, 2023.*



The very heart of Shetland has been torn apart by the global race to harness wind power through the construction of the Viking Energy Wind Farm, a massive industrial-scale development that will occupy the majority of our north-central mainland, upwards of 17% of the total landmass of the mainland island, the largest in our archipelago. The destruction is seen by many as catastrophic and irreparable.

I wonder if the environmental damage caused to the

past, families annually cut peat by hand every year in their allocated peat bank.

Will Viking Energy fulfil the promise of restoring peatlands and indigenous plant life? Will individuals, as well as the whole community, ever really heal from the negative impact on our physical and mental health, loss of community and ultimately the violation of our human rights?

The theme of renewal is embodied not only by the



Figure 7 'Destroying Shetland's Future'. Study for postcard series exploring the visual politics of extractivist corporate graphics, Image: Roxane Permar, 2023.

peatlands, flora and fauna by the construction and operation of the wind farm, and its related infrastructure, will ever be renewed. The pristine peatlands, which make up 50% of our archipelago and take thousands of years to form and act as carbon sinks, have been destroyed. The traditional practice of using peat to heat Shetland homes and to cook on the Raeburn hardly exists today. In the

potential for peatlands to be restored but also by the fact that help forests and woodland forests function as carbon stores. In the face of their degeneration, communities worldwide seek to restore important ecosystems that have been damaged or destroyed (Eger et al., 2020; Layton et al., 2020).

Ultimately, my work emerges from the tension that

exists through the challenge of living sustainably in the face of the large-scale industrialisation of the land and sea through the wind industry and related renewable energies, including those such as the mining industry, which serves the manufactures of wind turbines. How can we live in harmony with the land and sea, respecting and retrieving indigenous knowledge when we know that catastrophic climate change is upon us?

My desire for optimism and renewal provides reassurance in my struggle to learn how to live with this tension and the contradictions posed by the need to battle climate change yet to do so in a way that does not inflict further harm and loss to people, communities and the environment.

References

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Figure 8. Psithurism. Film still. Forest at Nordingrå, Sweden. Image: Roxane Permar, 2023.

