I Wasn't Going to Talk about Islands but in the End I Did

Geoffrey Farmer

Rock.

I have spent enough time in prison.

Now I can walk on the rocks of the Salish Sea. The sandstone rocks of the archipelago are melted, smooth dull shapes of half-eaten apples and honeycomb craters. Sloppy pug sounds of seawater fill their empty eye sockets. Domed and sprinkled with periwinkles and limpets, encrusted with razor sharp barnacles. Organisms returning in the occasional form of white splatters, evidence of the gulls' nitrogenous digestion. They live a life of watery erosion.

The intelligence of these rocks is best absorbed in bare feet during the summer months. Feet freed from shoes are sensitive transmitters, and wandering on these lunar shapes is conducive to musing. Perspectives shift rapidly when hands and feet are democratized and the sudden need to look up or down, hop or jump, triggers the mind and changes thinking. Intertidal pockets demand inspection. Eyes become nets while odoriferous materials collect and dry. Scale shifts quickly and sound travels unimpeded, like the clunk of an oar from a boat a kilometre away. Objects lodge themselves at the tideline: aluminum cans, plastic bottles and bags, shoes, bones, chunks of Styrofoam, fragments of nets or tangled knots of kelp. Space junk floating away from the gravitational pull of the city, islands like orbiting moons on the outskirts of thought. The self-centred city left to smirk.

On particular islands one can have fly eyes, bee songs or rock thoughts. Thoughts that settled down from watery suspension, compacted with tremendous force and cemented together with the delicate precipitation of minerals.

There is a sensibility and quality to place that itself could be a substance. And it was this kind of thinking about the substance of space that formed the material, time and experiments of Jerry Pethick's work. What appear as sculptural works function as optical systems that stretch us into otherly dimensions. The physicality of his picture making reminds us of vision's biological structures. Optical interference of barnacle-like crustaceans and refractory distortions that are much like looking back at the world from a watery perspective.

Islands, appearing as they do—as seemingly separate and surrounded—create a complex set of relations. They are places of fragmentation and dislocation. These are aspects of Pethick's work as well, and this brings to mind another kind of image making: the many petroglyphs that are scattered along the shores of the Salish Sea.

From the air, Petroglyph Provincial Park looks like an island within an island on another island. It is isolated, surrounded on one side by a subdivision called Highview Terrace,

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and on the other, across the highway, it is cradled by Petroglyph Animal Hospital, McKenzie Self Storage, Harbour International Trucks, Petroglyph Storage and Fat Cat Brewery. The area is a complicated knot of indexical pointers of what life on an island might be like. It is also the original site of the Snuneymuxw Nation's petroglyphs, which have endured relocation, the impact of development, tourist traffic and general mistreatment—both through vandalism and ignorance.

From the ridge you can see across the spidery delta of the Nanaimo River Estuary to Jack Point and the distant smokestacks of the Harmac pulp mill. This is the place where the salmon return each year, and where the ancestors of the Snuneymuxw Nation carved pictures of spring, humpback, coho and dog salmon into the soft rocks of Jack Point. It is also where long lines of cars embark and disembark the ferries from the mainland. The Snuneymuxw people have performed a ritual each year to ensure the return of the fish and to articulate the marriage between their people and the salmon. The salmon petroglyph, which was removed in the 1970s and housed in the Nanaimo Museum, was returned in 2008, but only two types of salmon return with any regularity.

An online description of Petroglyph Park reads:

> A short, wheelchair-accessible walkway leads from the parking lot to an interpretive area with information boards and a display of concrete replica casts taken from the nearby petroglyphs. The sandstone gallery of the originals is just a short distance farther along the walkway on a hill that overlooks the Nanaimo Harbour.
>
> Visitors who would like to take away an example of this ancient artwork can make rubbings on paper of the coffee-table size moulds. Cloth or paper is stretched across the carving and lightly rubbed with crayons, charcoal or wax, leaving a reverse image printed on the cloth.

This brings to mind three loops joined together like Jacques Lacan's Borromean rings—the three connected rings of human subjectivity: The Real, The Imaginary and The Symbolic. It could also be the *valknut,* the knot of the slain, which is carved into the Norse Stora Hammars image stones. Over one, over the next, back under the first, back under the second; what appears at first as three independent strands are in fact one endless loop that is impossible to separate. But this is mythical thinking on my part. I am confusing topology with topography. The above knot is a description of a place.

Paper.

The homonymic abilities of the knot perhaps function well as a metaphor for Pethick's work. It is not unlike the movement of a boat around an outcropping of rocks, an approach or a return that knits a loop. Its forms can only be understood by circumnavigation—a complete picture won't form otherwise.

A way up the coast from Jack Point is the dock where you catch the ferry to an island, to get to another island, the one that Pethick lived on. There is one known petroglyph there, very close to the gigantic rock that Jerry, Margaret and their son Yana lived under the protection of for several years in the early 1970s, before moving a little farther inland to build their home and Pethick's beautiful studio.

To get to Hornby Island from Vancouver, you have to travel out of the city. Most go by boat. Huge, white, oily ferries. Greasy wrenching machines. They shudder and glide, smelling of diesel fumes and French fries. Alien crafts, something out of a futurist's manifesto.

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Pethick's studio, Hornby Island, BC

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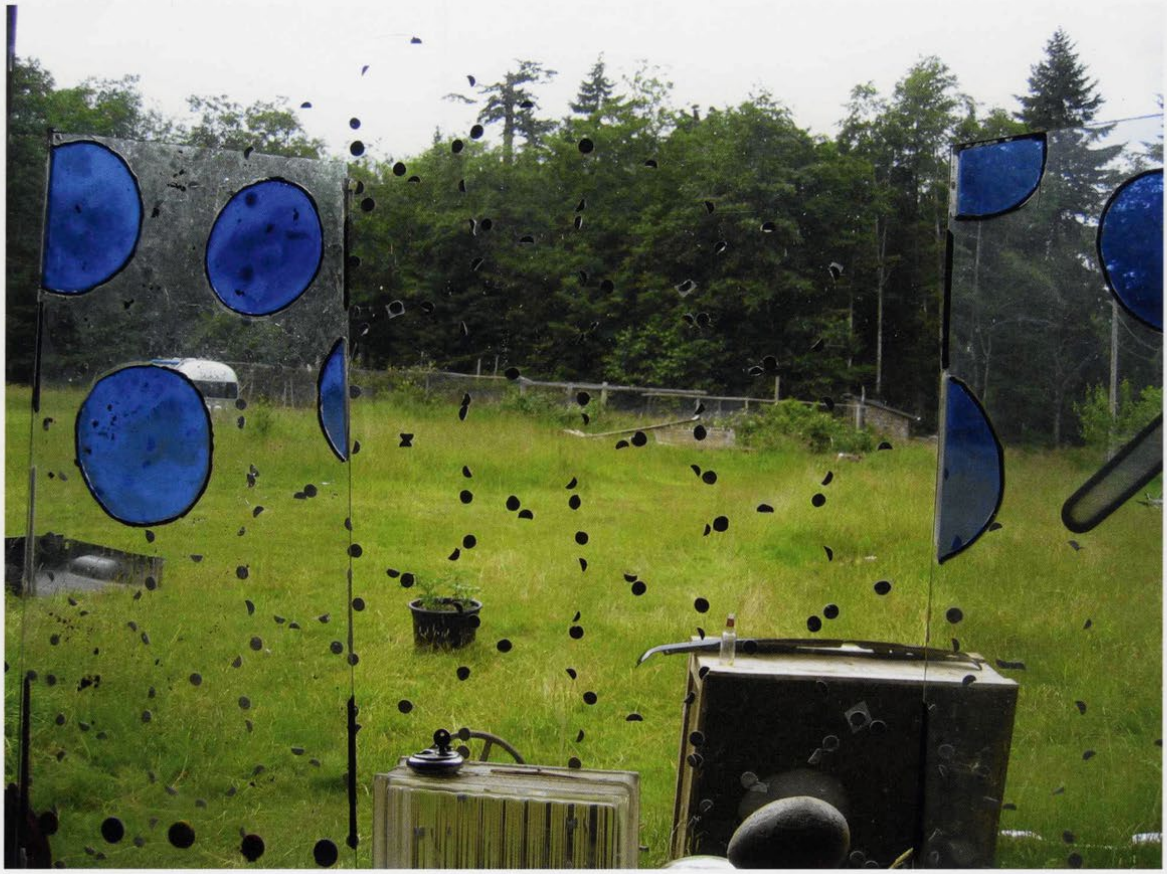
View from Pethick's studio, Hornby Island



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In the late summer, if you are lucky, you can spread out on the grey decks. Gusting winds turn hair into flames. Clothes press flat, whipping and fluttering. There are all kinds of people. Every kind of person you can imagine, occupying every kind of space. On a boat, what appears as fragmentation has an underlying force of unity. The foam white trail of a gigantic sea snail, in one long smoky exhale, transports you across the inlet. Like the effect of a photograph. Everyone being propelled forward, looking back together.

Scissors.

Some knots are used to gauge the speed of boats. Others to tie them up. Some are hyperbolic or linguistic and others are endless and complex like the game of cat's cradle. This last kind can result in acculturated forms—the sheep's wool Cowichan sweater being one. This type of sweater comes from the Cowichan Tribes of Vancouver Island. It emerged after missionaries and Scottish settlers arrived in 1864 and taught the great weavers there the Fair Isle technique of knitting.

The Cowichan sweater is also an image maker. Pixelated designs of deer, salmon or geometric motifs appear and are greatly varied. The Cowichan sweater I have, and love, is not authentic. This is because some of the wool has been dyed, which as I understand, the true ones are not. But these questions of authenticity bring on a certain kind of anxiety. Especially in a place as mixed up as this.

Hay.

There are two kinds of islands, accidental and originary. I think Pethick lived on both. Like travelling to an island or a moon, one must float to get to Pethick's work. It may sound like science fiction, but our organs, eyes and heads are doing just that. The incandescent surface of Spectra Foil, glass reflections and shifting views through Fresnel lenses emphasize this movement. Part instrument and part imagination. Communicating our position through the act of observing the blinking and twinkling interplanetary debris we can only partially recognize. Telescopes and time machines composed of kitchen sinks, spoons, glass bowls and aluminum siding, starships rolled out from within the hay-bale walls of his laboratory, the beautiful studio he built by hand. It is because of this that the work happily accepts either the whiteness of the museum, a starry night or the insects and direct sunlight of an open field.

The art of Jerry Pethick carries with it the deep concerns of sculpture and image making, but through the kaleidoscopic and holographic lens of San Francisco in the 1970s: a barefoot intellectualism. Pethick was a renegade. And this is encouraging for a younger generation of artists who are seeking for themselves alternatives and ways to redefine what intellectual activity might look like. His work becomes a beacon or buoy, and it is a relief to many that one can still be engaged with the continuity of art history and with philosophy—as Pethick's work shows us—with openness and experimentation, from an island, in bare feet and through the autostereoscopic array of a fly's eye.

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