

Saoirse Higgins

ANGLE OF VISION

24th July – 28th August 2021

Pier Arts Centre
Victoria Street
Stromness KW16 3AA
Orkney
www.pierartscentre.com



Papa Westray centre point flag deployed by Papay islander Jessie Dodman, 28th March 2021

Digitally printed linen union 74cm x 74cm
Printed by the Centre for Advanced Textiles, Glasgow School of Art
Copyright artist, 2019.

ARTWORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

- 1. *Angle of Vision - Map of the Geographical Centre Point of 93 Inhabited Scottish Islands***
Limited edition of 50 colour maps
860 x 1000mm unfolded
Scale 1: 1000 000,
1cm to 10 kilometres or 1 inch to 16 miles
In collaboration with Ordnance Survey
digitally printed linen flag
Flag dimensions 74cm x 74cm
Sculpture dimensions 85cm height x 30 cm diameter
Adjustable flagpole 600-1220mm
Sculpture fabrication: Jonathan Ford
Digital printing: Centre for Advanced Textiles, Glasgow School of Art
- 2. *Island Centre Marker Buoy***
Aluminium sculpture with adjustable flagpole and
3. ***Papa Westray Centre Point Flag***
Digital print on linen 74cm x 74cm
Digital printing: Centre for Advanced Textiles, Glasgow School of Art
- 4. *Distant Views of the Land***
HD Projection with sound, 10'24" looped [360° version also available to view [online](#).
N.B. the film is best viewed at at least 1440s HD or 2160s 4K.]
Created and filmed by Saoirse Higgins
Filmed and recorded on location: Fowl Flag, North Papa Westray, Orkney islands
Location: Grid Ref: HY 5076 5454 • X/Y co-ords: 350763, 1054540 • Lat/Long: 59.37429810,-2.86819758
Text excerpt read by: Jessie Dodman, age 16, Papa Westray, Orkney
Audio recording: Fiona McLellan and Saoirse Higgins
Video and audio editing: Ian Cudmore, Chutney [films] Cork, Ireland
- 5. *349432, 1052207 Geographic Centre Point Flag with Island Standard Bearer, Jessie Dodman***
B&W digital print on photographic paper 84cm x 56cm
- 6. *Murdoch Mackenzie, Orcades: or a geographic and hydrographic survey of the Orkney and Lewis Islands, in eight maps: exhibiting the rocks, shoals, soundings, quality of the bottom, diversities of the coast, flowings, setting of the tides, and distant views of the land, 1750***
64cm x 43cm
On loan from Orkney Library and Archive

'But, John, have you seen the world, said he,
Trains and tramcars and sixty-seaters,
Cities in lands across the sea –
Giotto's tower and the dome of St Peter's?

No, but I have seen the arc of the earth,
From the Birsay shore, like the edge of a planet,
And the lifeboat plunge through the Pentland Firth
To a cosmic tide with the men that man it.'

Angle of Vision, Robert Rendall (1957)

In the summer of 2019, Irish artist Saoirse Higgins undertook a placement as Embedded Artist with Scottish Government, joining a consultation team that visited 40 of Scotland's 93 inhabited islands - from the Shetland Islands to the Outer Hebrides, gathering the views of islanders in order to develop Scotland's first National Islands Plan (NIP). This exhibition showcases newly commissioned work by Higgins resulting from this placement, being invited to respond to the consultation process from a different angle, connecting the voices and experiences of islanders in a different way.

Taking its title from a poem by Orcadian poet Robert Rendall (1898-1967), the exhibition focuses on the interactions between islanders and those arriving from the mainland by tracing the oscillating movement between two island viewpoints: one looking out from the island edge to sea - the islanders' horizon; and the other looking in from the sea to the island - the ship's eye view of the edge of the island, which islanders look out for on their journey home, or when taking themselves out to sea. In portraying this, Higgins draws from her conversations with islanders, geospatial data and 360-degree film footage, while using her own body as a cartographic tool - approaching, becoming entangled with, and connecting different island landscapes.

Higgins' investigations of the sea to island viewpoint are influenced by a series of maps developed by 18th century hydrographer Murdoch Mackenzie (1712-1797), held in the collection of the Orkney Archive in Kirkwall and loaned to Pier Arts Centre specially for this exhibition. Mackenzie mapped Orkney, the Hebrides and Ireland, making the land the anchor point for the sea to make his maps. Mackenzie's work made it safer for islanders to travel to and from islands and provides a good analogy with the Scottish Government's NIP as a tool aspiring to meaningfully improve the quality of life for island communities which simultaneously broadens connections and conversations with the mainland.

Higgins' own mapping journey begins with *Angle of Vision - Map of the Geographical Centre Point of 93 Inhabited Scottish Islands*, developed in collaboration with cartographic design consultant Paul Naylor and technical consultant Chris Mee at Ordnance Survey. This map shows all inhabited Scottish islands with lines linking their individual calculated geographical centre points to their collective island nation centre. The mainland territories are absent in this map, emphasizing an island-centred viewpoint, which destabilizes dominant notions of centre and periphery. The map is displayed in the exhibition, as well as being available as a limited edition print, and is accompanied by a specially designed *Island Centre Marker Buoy* with the mathematical formula that was used to calculate the island geographical centre points printed on its body.

The abstracted, geospatial information contained in the maps gives way to an embodied understanding of place in Higgins' film *Distant Views of the Land*, adopting a land to sea view. The film was shot on the island of Papa Westray (also known as Papay) in Orkney, where she lives, on its most Northern point - called Fowl Flag. It shows a view out to sea from the land with Higgins standing right beside the viewer, who is invited to join her in a moment of contemplation and survey the landscape together. While recalling imagery from art and literature of the Romantics, including Caspar David Friedrich's 1808 painting *The Monk by the Sea*, Higgins' depiction of herself looking out to sea never stops being everyday, both in scale and sentiment, partaking in a sense of reverence for the landscape and collective guardianship over it that is integral to island life. Many islanders interviewed by the artist in Papay spoke to her of their close connection with the sea, and how the island's boundedness by the ocean frames how they experience themselves in the landscape. The film's audio track is of the sea around Papay, with 16-year old islander Jessie Dodman reading a text excerpt from Murdoch Mackenzie's 1774 *Treatise on Maritime Surveying*. Our attention is drawn here to the younger generation, whose ideas and energy are core to the survival of islands, providing hope for the future.

Nestled between physical locatedness and an imagined elsewhere, Higgins' works draw us into a lived, embodied experience of island life, imbued with geopolitical realities and a pressing sense of both urgency and optimism in looking to the future. Both close and distant, feet rooted to the ground as much as bird's eye, these multi-faceted views of land and sea capture moments of alive, complex and caring occupancy of islands by different generations of islanders and visitors, underpinned by a shared awareness of the islands' own vibrant presence and agency.



349432, 1052207

Papa Westray geographic centre point flag deployed by Papay islander Jessie Dodman
Black and white digital print on photographic paper. Dimensions 84cm x 56cm
Copyright artist, 2020.

The NIP Embedded Artist Placement & Commission continues the tradition of ‘embedding’ artists within working contexts outwith the arts, notably developed in the UK through the activities of John Latham and Barbara Steveni’s *Artists Placement Group* (1966-1979). The Embedded Artist model is grounded in the premise that placing artists within public and private sectors can have a transformative impact upon the world of work and is mutually beneficial for both artists and hosts.

This model has a strong legacy in Scotland, including through the work of David Harding, who was employed as Town Artist by the Glenrothes Development Corporation (1968-1978). Harding served as a member of staff within the Planning Department, contributing to the development of built environment projects from the outset. Organisations employing Embedded Artists in Scotland today include the charity Creative Carbon Scotland (as part of their Cultural Adaptations programme), and Glasgow City Council, currently delivering the SNP’s manifesto commitment to establish a city-wide artist in residence programme, connecting local culture with community regeneration.

The idea for NIP Embedded Artist Placement & Commission gestated over the course of the collaborative research project [Law, Arts and Island Resilience \(LAIR\)](#), funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh and undertaken by researchers from Reading Landscape group and Mónica Laiseica at The Glasgow School of Art, and Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law and Governance in 2018-19. The project explored how the Islands (Scotland) Act (enshrined in law in July 2018, just a few months into the project) would promote resilience on Scotland’s islands, and in connection with this, the role that arts and creativity play in supporting island cultures.

Over a series of workshops held in North Uist, delivered in collaboration with Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum & Arts Centre, islanders were invited to discuss different ways in which creativity helped them be resilient, from shaping island businesses and jobs to creative approaches underpinning their day-to-day living, and what opportunities and ambitions for the future might be gleaned from this. These were intense and passionate discussions, where creativity emerged as an embedded and valued aspect of island life, core to survival but also stimulated by its unique environmental and social contexts. For many of these islanders, life on an island is inseparable from a duty of care for the island’s fragile ecosystem and their connectedness and collective reliance as a community. Being creative – thinking outside the box, helped them adapt and make the most of the resources they have, but also take risks and drive change.

The NIP Embedded Artist Placement & Commission were natural next steps from these conversations. Funded by Scottish Government, it gave an artist living on a Scottish island the opportunity to join the island-wide consultation (May-July 2019) undertaken to inform the development of Scotland’s first National Island Plan, ensuring that a creative perspective was embedded in this process. The response to the call for artists was overwhelmingly positive. Artists living across the Scottish islands and spanning different artforms submitted proposals of extraordinary quality, which passionately advocated for different ways in which art and creativity could contribute to the shaping of a future vision for the islands.

“My practice has been based on and about Papay, creating performative events and ‘survival tools’ with the community that reflect the unique edge environment, exploring the island viewpoint in relation to global scale issues of the Anthropocene.”

Saoirse Higgins’ active engagement with island life – “to live, survive and thrive” on Papay, and her approach to her practice – working in a space between the analytical, the pragmatic and the poetic – secured the Commission.

With a passion for the environment and an engagement with technology and cartography, she navigates a creative route through the complicated and dynamic relationships between nature and culture, and local and global issues. She was keen to observe part of the NIP consultation process first-hand and use her creative skills to reflect on the more subtle experiences of island living not so readily or easily named and quantified yet that remain of fundamental importance to islanders.

The need to live sustainably and creatively are key to Higgins’ way of thinking and working on her home island of Papay. The importance of these qualities were also key findings from the LAIR workshops on Uist in 2018-19. Both were identified as essential for building resilience to the challenges of island life, within individuals and communities alike. It is creativity that allows one to think differently: to literally be creative but also to imagine, to speculate, be adaptable, to find alternative solutions to problems or ways of talking about them. To question mainstream solutions when they are inappropriate and be “a bit rebellious” if need be.¹

Island life provides islanders with unique perspectives and a distinct sense of place. Contingent on the scale of the landmass, and more so than for land-locked urban dwellers, islanders have the capacity to look inwards to the land and to ‘home’ and, with a turn of the head, outwards to the horizon and the world beyond; to be tied to community yet, simultaneously, connected to elsewhere; to be in tune with the elements and the natural world; to be moved by the sea; and to “dance with the wind”.²

“I am interested in revealing the connections between our visions of the world we live in, our expectations for the future and the processes and systems we use to help with this.”

This awareness of the natural world and a heightened sense of our impact upon it is borne of proximity to it. On an island one sees the marks made, the traces left by humans, all the more

vidently. The need to live sustainably is made more apparent. We should all learn from islanders. They know these things already. Through relationship with the land and the seascape there is a heightened understanding of self in relation to place. A sense of *being* in the world in an interconnected way. Being part of nature, not separate from it, so being responsible for and inextricably linked to our environment and the way we live in it together.

“I’ve been looking at [...] the ‘seesaw effect’ of glaciers melting and sea levels rising, one effect [...] causing the other.”

For communities and places that are surrounded by water, one of the very real threats literally on the horizon is rising sea levels. Though still denied by some, there is clear scientific proof of global warming which will undoubtedly impact island and coastal communities most profoundly.

“My work is participatory, process-driven and has a scientifically influenced approach.”

It was Higgins’ engagement with climate change and its impact upon fragile ecologies, a concern shared with other islanders, and her curiosity about scientific and technological thinking combined with her love of maps, that drew her towards the research of Murdoch Mackenzie; the Orcadian hydrographer and cartographer, known for his survey of the Orkney islands and his subsequent maps, the Mackenzie Charts, which set a standard of accuracy and detail still relevant to mariners today. In Higgins’ video work, *Distant Views of the Land*, extracts from Mackenzie’s *Treatise on Maritime Surveying*³ spoken by Jessie Dodman – a 16 year old resident of Papay – have become interwoven with sound recordings of the sea surrounding her island, and Higgins’ own view of the horizon from the northern most point of Papa Westray: Fowl Flag. It is a view across the same waters first charted by Mackenzie nearly 250 years ago. Through the spoken text, we are prompted to think about how the sublime liquid landscape and coastline has been described, mapped and rationalised in the past and how it might need to be reconsidered in the future. Albeit virtually, we are taken to a place geographically, phenomenologically and emotionally meaningful to the artist, to the writer-cartographer and to the narrator simultaneously.

1 Keith McIntyre, LAIR Workshop 2, Taigh Chearsabhagh, North Uist, 28 September 2018.

2 Meg Rodger, LAIR Workshop 2, Taigh Chearsabhagh, North Uist, 28 September 2018.

3 Murdoch Mackenzie’s *A Treatise on Maritime Surveying in Two Parts: With a Prefatory Essay on Draughts and Surveys of the Sea-coast*, E. and C. Dilly, 1774.

Less explicit than through direct quotation of Mackenzie's methods of surveying, the work is equally inspired by the research of Rachel Carson (1907-1964) – marine biologist and conservationist – whose writings reveal both the science and poetry of the oceans,⁴ and by the thoughts and lived experience of Méabh McKenzie (a 12 year-old islander with whom Higgins was in dialogue during the commission) reflecting on her relationship to the sea.

"I am excited about travelling around the distinct dispersed Scottish Islands gathering and transmitting the islanders' narratives from my artistic peripatetic lens and toolkit, tracing a web of collective energy and connectivity between islands and island folk."

The process of journeying between islands, from Shetland to the Outer Hebrides, that was part of the National Island Plan: Embedded Artist Commission, and Higgins' love of maps and mapping was what also gave rise to her collaboration with Paul Naylor and Chris Mee from Ordnance Survey. Prompted through conversation with the commissioners in the research phase of the NIP-Embedded Artist project, Higgins speculated: *What if we didn't think of the Scottish islands as being on the periphery? What if we traced the centre point of Scotland from its edges? Where would the centre point of each island be?*

With the help and skills of Naylor and Mee, the limited edition map *Angle of Vision - Map of the Geographical Centre Point of 93 Inhabited Scottish Islands*, was created. The calculated geographic centres of each island or island group was plotted, and from these, the geographic centre of a ghosted landmass or collective nation located. Through the cartographers' and artist's eyes, we thus see the mainland differently; centre and periphery are switched and ideas of remoteness are questioned. By re-determining the 'centre' from Scotland's 'edges', perhaps we can once more understand places detailed on the map as having the significance they had in an earlier age; when different sea-trading routes determined alternative centres of power.

The notion of each island having its own centre is further played upon by Higgins through the systematic calculation of their co-ordinates (again in collaboration with Naylor and Mee), and the printing of these upon a dedicated flag to be transported to individual islands where and when this body of commissioned work is to be shown. The mathematical formula used to calculate the centre point is printed on the body of a sculptural object – *Island Centre Marker Buoy* – that is also

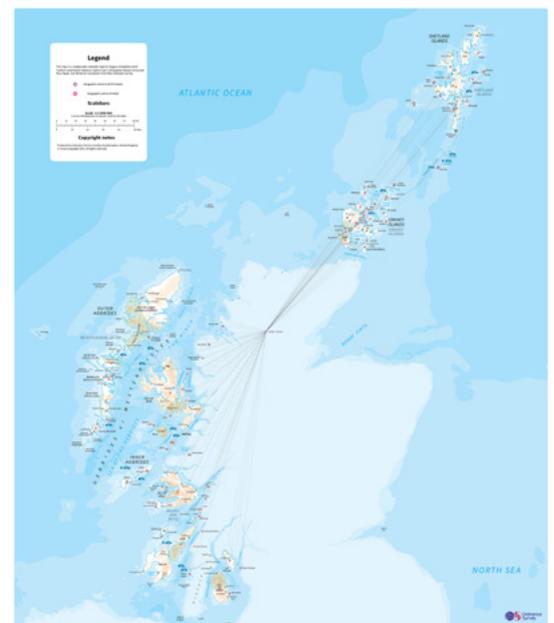
"I am interested in island remote participation, power and agency and the unique concentrated connection with nature, adaptation and change – important attributes for this fragile world we live in and for future survival."

All quotes by Saoirse Higgins, 2019.

literally the centre point of the exhibition. Its significance becomes most apparent when each island's dedicated centre point flag is removed from within the buoy and taken on a community walk, with the artist, to the island's calculated centre. As the exhibition travels, the planting of each flag by different islanders will indicate the culmination of a collective action to locate and mark each island's heart.

In this whole body of work the artist shifts us from the mathematically calculated, apparent fact of our locatedness on land, through the experience of natural phenomena, to the imagined world beyond the horizon. Suspended in the liminal space between the land and the sea, we drift between the familiar and the unknown, reflecting upon our sense of place and our entanglement in geopolitical realities. Through Higgins' research and artwork, we are asked to think about the past, the future and our own place within it.

© Susan Brind and Mónica Laiseca, 2021.



Angle of Vision - Map of the Geographical Centre Point of 93 inhabited Scottish Islands
Limited edition colour map, 860mm x 1000mm
Scale 1: 1000 000, 1cm to 10 Kilometres or 1 inch to 16 miles
Designed by the artist in collaboration with Paul Naylor and Chris Mee, Ordnance Survey
Crown Copyright, 2019.

SAOIRSE HIGGINS

Saoirse Higgins is an artist and designer from Dublin, Ireland, based in Papa Westray, Orkney. She is interested in revealing some of the connections between our vision of the world we live in, our expectations for the future and the technology we use to help us with this. She explores the contested spaces of the Anthropocene - human-machine, human-nature. Her work is process-driven and she often collaborates with other experts and communities.

Saoirse has shown work at the Thessaloniki Biennale; Science Gallery, Dublin; Montreal Film and Media festival; Transmediale, Berlin; Siggraph, New Orleans; Exit Art and Location One gallery, New York. She has held residences at SIM, Iceland, Swatch Peace Art Hotel, Shanghai, e-Mobilart Lab, Disonancias in Spain, Location1 gallery in New York and the Banff Centre for the Arts. She is also cofounder of the ØY island festival exploring islands, art and culture.



Distant Views of the Land

HD projected film with sound, 10'24" looped
Copyright artist, 2019.

EXHIBITION TOUR

After launching at Pier Arts Centre in Orkney, *Angle of Vision* will tour to a number of island venues across Scotland through 2022.

Details to be announced in late 2021.

CREDITS

All the works in the exhibition have been developed by artist Saoirse Higgins following her placement in 2019 as National Islands Plan Embedded Artist, funded by Scottish Government. The National Islands Plan consultation process took place between April - July 2019.

The National Islands Plan Embedded Artist placement and exhibition have been co-curated by Susan Brind and Mónica Laiseca (Glasgow School of Art).

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