

## Art reviews: Where We Meet Land | Winston Roeth | Charlene Scott

The seven artists' films screening in the Fruitmarket Gallery's Warehouse Space this month explore the relationship between human beings and the earth, writes Susan Mansfield

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**Where We Meet Land: Environment and ecology in artists' moving image, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh ★★★★★**

**Winston Roeth, Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh ★★★★★**

**Charlene Scott, Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh ★★★★★**

The tercentenary of the pioneering Scottish geologist James Hutton is running through visual art programming this year like a seam of quartz. Ilana Halperin's solo show at Fruitmarket, [What Is Us and What Is Earth](#), was programmed with Hutton in mind and she also features in Earth Matters, a big group show at Inverleith House, due to open later this month.



A still from Hanna Tuulikki's film Sealskin at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh | Courtesy of the artist

Now, the relationship of human beings to the earth is being further explored in **Where We Meet Land**, a programme of artists' films in the Fruitmarket's Warehouse Space as part of the gallery's Attached to Land programming strand. Seven short films by artists from Scotland and beyond are screened in a rolling programme which takes about two hours, though visitors are free to come and go as they please.

Fergus Carmichael's 2017 film, *Island, Island*, acts as a kind of companion piece to Halperin's exhibition, set on the small Icelandic island of Heimaey where Halperin has explored her own connections to the volcano Eldfell. Bookended with archive footage of the eruption in 1973, which led to the temporary evacuation of the island's people, it focuses on day-to-day life in the shadow of the volcano, and a music festival held on its lava fields.

Particularly powerful is the way the flares, bonfires and fireworks of the rock festival echo the towering geysers of lava from the 1973 eruption. It starts to feel like an ancient ritual, pacifying the fire god of the mountain to ensure ongoing peace and prosperity.

If Heimaey is a particularly extreme example of coexistence between humankind and natural forces, Hanna Tuulikki's *Seals'kin* is gentle, almost plaintive. Tuulikki, who often uses her fine singing voice in her work, is pictured singing to a seal colony in Aberdeenshire, her tuneful, seal-like calls echoing those of the seals across the bay. Wrapping herself in a cloth with a sealskin pattern, and finally swimming in it, she is reaching out to the seals, and they appear somewhat intrigued by her.

Beautifully filmed, and tapping into the myths of selkies – seals who turn into women – it ends up being about closeness and distance, the similarities of human and seals, and the poignancy of the distance which keeps the seal colony on one side of the bay and the artist on the other.

*Congenial soils and favourable situations (2022)* by filmmaker Rachel McBrinn and writer Alison Scott, a commission by Cove Park and ACT (Argyll Climate Beacon), is a reflection on our relationship with forests. Filmed at several locations in the West of Scotland, it traces how the monoculture forestry plantations of the 1970s and 1980s, which managed trees aggressively as a resource, have given way to a gentler approach of restoring native species. Scott's poetic text gradually gives way to the voices of the forest guides and volunteers who are helping to make this process happen.

These three films invite us to slow down, look long and listen, with long, lingering shots which challenge both the pace of life and the pace of mainstream film. Kadeen Oak and Jonn Gale's film, *Pressed Flowers of the Empire*, is much more word- and idea-heavy. An essay by Gale, who is an ethnobotanist, is married with grainy footage from a documentary on Kew Gardens made in 1980.

The piece is critical of "colonial science", and its drive to capture, file and categorise the world's plants as an element of its attempted mastery of the earth. The endless sample books and taxonomies of Kew Gardens – and by extension all botanic gardens – are witness, Gale says, to acts of erasure and extraction. However, Gale writes, this is not the whole story: Kew Gardens was also where they discovered their own ancestral history.

Onyeka Igwe's *The Miracle on George Green* begins with the 1993 protest in which residents of Wanstead, East London, built a treehouse in a much loved 250-year-old sweet chestnut in a bid to save it from being cut down to make room for a tunnel linking to the M11. The film then circles outwards, a little confusingly, to other narratives and memories, weaving in songs going as far back at the Diggers movement of the 17th century.

Helen McCrorie's five-minute film *We know a better word than happy* argues for the rights of small children to play outside in the mud in a way that those a couple of decades older took for granted, and Olivia Priya Foster's *Land* as an archive is also about play and memory, though her sister's memories of the farm where they grew up is paired, uneasily, with fragmenting digital imagery.



Detail from Cadmium, 2022, by Winston Roeth | Tom Moore

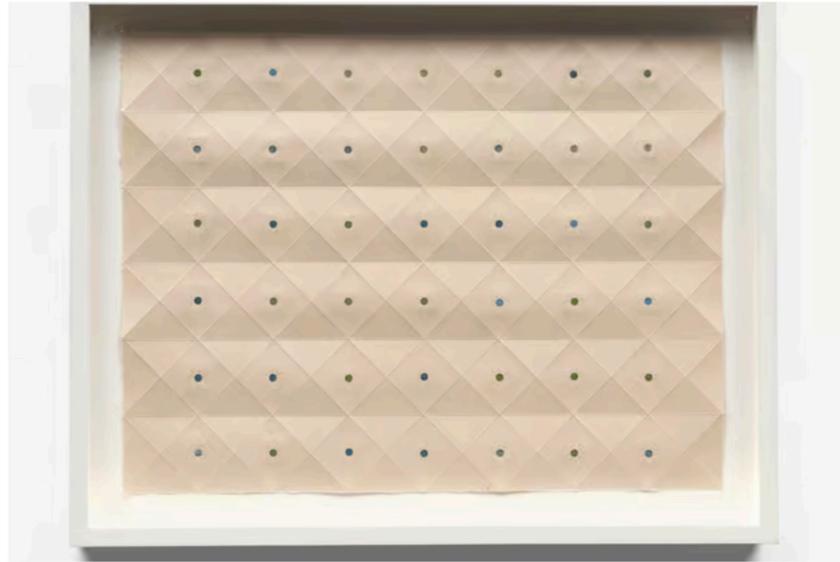
If *moving image*, by its nature, evokes a time and place, **Winston Roeth's** paintings feel timeless and still. The American artist, now in his early eighties, formed his ideas in the heyday of abstract expressionism and colourfield painting. His work is rigorous and restrained, and yet that doesn't do enough to describe its effects.

Stay with these paintings for even a little while and works which first appear minimalist begin to act on the viewer. One becomes hyper-aware of the precision with which they are hung, the space between the panels of colour, the colours themselves: how the black is a dense, reflectionless black, or an orange is so strong it seems to thrum in your field of vision.

You start to think about colour along with words like "pitch" and "tone", how the vertical row of panels in *Shades of Darkness* might possibly be played like piano keys. You become alert to texture – some of these are painted on wood, or slate – to the space they occupy on the wall, to the architecture of the room.

A work such as *Lines of Light*, in which nine square blue panels are each divided into four sections by two diagonal lines, starts to look really quite busy. The subtle changes of the light on this work had me staring for ages trying to work out if the panels were different shades of blue (they're the same), or actually three-dimensional (they're not).

As much as *moving image*, and perhaps in an even more intense way, these paintings are about attention. They invite us to focus, if we can, and discover what happens when we do.



bud 2, by Charlene Scott at the Ingleby Gallery | Courtesy of the artist

A thoughtful accompaniment to the Roeth show is the Instalment (Ingleby's strand for emerging work) upstairs by **Charlene Scott**. A graduate of Edinburgh College of Art in 2023, Scott won the Glenfiddich Artist in Residence Award the following year, and was selected for a Visual Art Scotland residency in Orkney last year.

She is an abstract artist, too, who has established her own particular style and technique: making pictures by very precisely folding paper, then marking the lines of the folds with soft botanical pigments. If Roeth occasionally teases us into thinking a flat painting is three-dimensional, Scott's works really are 3D, catching the light with their geometric grid patterns.

She has expanded her repertoire too, adding loops of coloured ribbon which allow her explore palettes of tones, and embossing patterns on to paper which has been soaked in dyebaths of natural colour. Her work manages to feel both handmade and unfailingly precise.

Abstract artists often create for themselves rules and parameters within which to work, sometimes with what feels like a punishing degree of restriction. Scott's work shows – as Roeth's does – how rigorous boundaries can offer a near-infinite range of possibilities.