

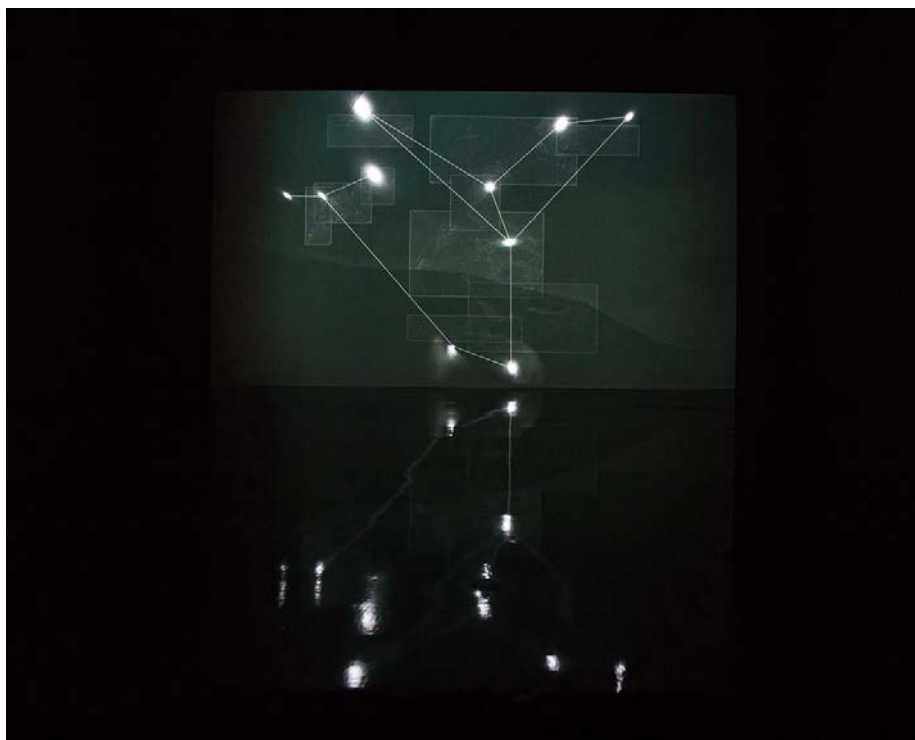
Mhairi Killin Residency Blog

I'm mindful in writing this of the debt I owe to the British conceptual artist Barbara Steveni who was the co founder of the Artist Placement Group - an artist led organisation which ran from 1965 into the 1990s, and sought to shift the focus of art beyond the traditional gallery setting by embedding artists in society, often within a governmental or business context. Within these specific environments, the artist could respond with radical interventions and exhibitions which questioned the accepted hegemony of thinking around social, economic and environmental issues.

Today, we acknowledge the APG as the precursor to socially engaged art practice, and to our understanding and acknowledgment of this area of art as critical to contemporary practice. "Context is Half the Work" was their key maxim. Their highly innovative thinking paved the way for the widespread and diverse practice of global artist residencies that we commonly see today, like the one I undertook in August 2023 at Grinneabhat. ¹

The aim of my week long residency at Grinneabhat was to introduce the project, *On Sonorous Seas*, to the local community and explore further iterations of the work in the context of the village of Bragar. *On Sonorous Seas*, is a multi-disciplinary, collaborative project which began in 2018 when a whale carcass washed ashore on the Isle of Iona, where I live, and also on the shore at Bragar, near the croft of artist/curator, Jon Macleod.

The Iona Whale and the Bragar Whale were two of one hundred and eighteen Beaked Whale carcasses washed ashore during a few weeks in autumn 2018 - an event which slowly revealed itself as an entangled story of the cryptic environments of the Cuvier's Beaked Whales and the military. The project interrogates the power of, and reliance on, sound as a survival tool for whales and the military, and the complex relationship between the militarisation of Scotland's seas and their existing ecosystems. *On Sonorous Seas* represents a development of focus within my practice around the question of extraction in the Hebrides as a consequence of the presence of the military, and whether this particular presence has resulted in a psychological disarticulation between a specific culture and its immediate environment.



A Constellation of Strandings, video installation, An Tobar Gallery, Isle of Mull, 2022 Image Sarah Darling

¹ Bell-Jones, G. (2023) 'Devolving Art's Histories: Regionalism and Reception', British Art after Britain. British Art Network Annual Conference, Glasgow, 25 November, 2023



The Bragar Whale installed at Grinnebhat exhibition room, August 2023. Image by the artist.

On Sonorous Seas created an enquiring energy around this question and wider topics such as our relationship to the non human worlds around us in this Anthropocene age. I hoped that by returning the whale head to Bragar, installing it a Grinneabhat, and using the exhibition space in a particular way I could learn more about this village's relationship with whales, and to some of the themes the project raised.

It seemed fitting to bring the Bragar whale 'home', not least because of the village's long association with whales and their remains, but also as a powerful, totemic object. I hoped that its presence might hold a space at Grinneabhat, reflecting the ethos of the centre by welcoming people in to share conversation and stories around the whale, about the whale, of the whale.

The context of Bragar, and its relationship to whales and whaling, meant that it did indeed become, 'Half the Work'. One of the stories central to the village's relationship to whales is the famous Whalebone Arch - the lower jawbone of a harpooned Blue Whale whose carcass drifted in

to Geodha Nam Muc, Bragar, in the autumn of 1920. The story is best told by Mary Macaulay, the daughter of Murdo Morrison, the man who in 1921 erected the arch over his gateway in the village of Bragar. I was delighted to meet Mary during the residency and you can read her account of the Whalebone Arch here <http://www.bragarwhalebone.co.uk/marymacaulay.htm>



Bragar School Children under the arch, 1920's Image courtesy of Grinneabhat

This image of the Bragar children -100 little Jonahs - under the whalebone arch reminded me of the title of a poetic and insightful book by Rebecca Giggs, 'Fathoms: the World in the Whale'. The book inspired my thinking during the *On Sonorous Seas* project, and it blends natural history, philosophy, and science to explore difficult questions in the midst of our ecological crisis. Like me, and so many islanders, Rebecca Giggs encountered a stranded whale on her local beach in Australia, and she began to wonder how the lives of whales might shed light on the condition of

our seas, our relationship to the more than human world and ultimately on our own future and that of the planet. Her whale, like the Bragar and Iona whales, became a metaphor for the seismic impact of human activity on the morethanhuman world, and the symbol of the whale as a legacy of extractive capitalism is something I'll be exploring next year during a residency on Svalbard.

Being in residence with the Bragar whale, the centre, and its visitors, gave me a chance to extend the *On Sonorous Seas* project outwards, whilst reflecting inwards on some of the questions the project raised. The residency also gave me time to read, draw and catch up on research notes.



*Drawing and whalebone artefacts, Grinnebhat Exhibition Room, August 2023.
Image by the artist.*

I made myself available and welcomed people into the space daily, in addition to holding an artist talk and a closing studio event. In this way the space became studio, exhibit, and salon as I opened my practice up and out; drawing, thinking, reading, talking, sharing, and inviting a curiosity about what connects an artist to place, to an idea, to a feeling, to a purpose.



*Drawing and whalebone artefacts. Grinnebhat Exhibition Room, August 2023
Image by the artist.*

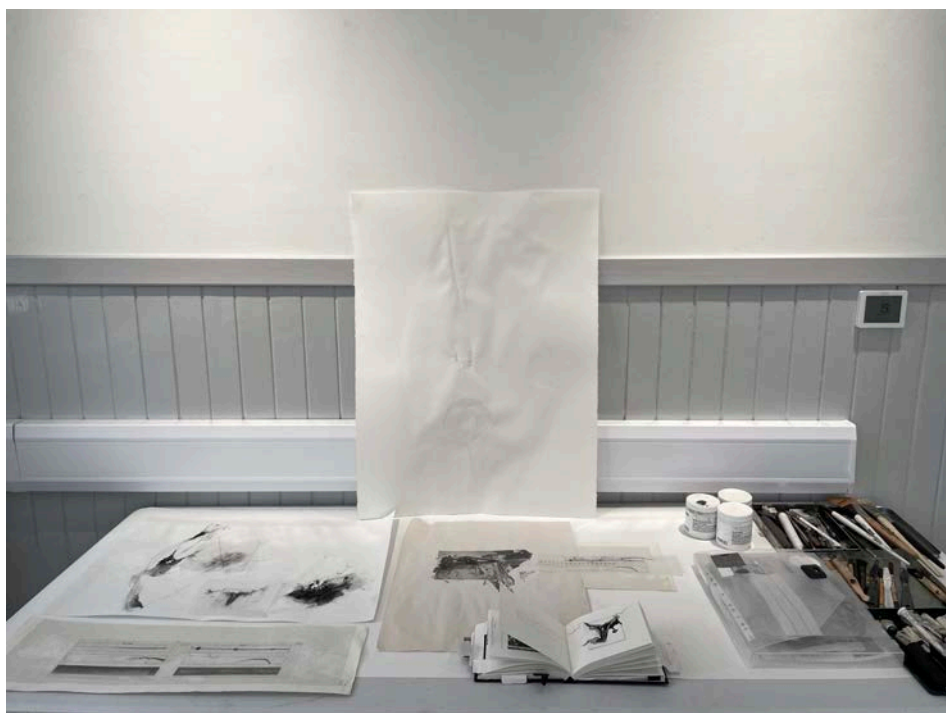
I am very grateful for the conversations with local and visiting artists, travellers, and villagers about their own encounters with whales, their views on the presence of the military in the Hebrides, and their connections through family to the whaling industry, locally at the whaling station at Bun Abhainn Eadarra, and also in the Arctic and Antarctica.



Drawing and whalebone artefacts. Grinneabhat Exhibition Room, August 2023. Image by the artist.

I think that the most worthwhile residencies offer moments of reciprocity between artist and context; bringing an artist closer to place, people and story, and hopefully bringing the public closer to artistic practice - enough to allow an exchange. Grinneabhat, and the community of Bragar were without doubt 'half the work' during my residency and I'd like to extend my thanks to everyone who took time to share a conversation through the whale.

I'd also like to say a huge thank you to Jon Macleod, Tina Macphail, Peigi Anne Scott, Anne Campbell and Robbie Thomson for their insight, hospitality, facilitation and support. Thanks also to Mary Morrison, and to CHARTS for part funding the residency through the Island Development Project, Ràmh.



*Open Studio, Conversations Through a Whale, Grinneabhat, August 2023.
Image by the artist.*

