

CAMPLE—LINE

**YELENA POPOVA
MADE GROUND
01.10 - 11.12.22**



Cample 2, 2022

George Vasey is a curator and writer. He has worked with organisations such as BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art and Wellcome Collection and many others on multidisciplinary projects. His writing is regularly published in magazines, journals and books. He is a Trustee at New Contemporaries and in 2017 he co-curated the Turner Prize, Ferens Art Gallery, Hull.

Made Ground

Up the North-East coast, not far from where I live is the Tees estuary which is broached by the North and South Gare. The landscape is an amalgam of human intervention and nature. Much of it reclaimed from the sea with slag, the waste product of the defunct steel industry. Like many industrial locations the land has absorbed industrial toxicity, and yet nature seems to have found a renewed resilience. The area has a complicated geology.

Walking around the estuary is a potent and solemn experience. On a recent visit I encountered rare tulips, their mutated colour evidencing the soil's unnaturally high levels of zinc, a legacy of steel production. A rusting nuclear power station is fortified with barbed wire. It abuts the skeletal remains of dead industry. A decommissioned oilrig is slowly being taken apart by cranes and hungry seagulls. Rows of fishermen's huts pepper the shoreline, sinking into the sand.

Erosion becomes sedimented; incremental and accumulative. This site is very much made ground: the soil forming a deep time slow dance; nature and human activity lapping at each other. What will future archeologists make of this site? How might they judge us? Everything humans produce ends up in our soil: a cocktail of pesticides and minerals, micro-organisms and metals. If geology is an archive of our collective actions, the Gare speaks of an extractive thirst, the land as resource for expansion and industry. It is made and unmade, scared by its recent history.

In walking around this site, I think about Yelena Popova's work, which – although largely abstract – is ecologically attuned. The artist's extensive and far-reaching practice encompasses film, sculpture, weaving and painting. Popova's paintings incorporate biomorphic and calligraphic shapes painted in washes of thinly veiled pigment on bare linen. They recall a myriad of painterly histories including; Futurist and Constructivist graphics¹ as well as ancient calligraphic traditions. Other influences include mandalas,

which are characterised by their complex geometric configurations and are used as meditation aides in Hinduism and Buddhism. In reproduction her paintings can feel ghostly and indeterminate yet they come to life in physical encounter; the surfaces shimmering and velvety. The paintings reward repeated viewing: morning and evening light throwing up subtly different details on their surfaces.

Popova repurposes abstraction for the 21st century; imbibing biographical, social and political contexts into her works. While her paintings betray a certain reticence they come from deep and thorough research. Popova talks of her work as a form of sculpture or weaving; bringing images, ideas and impressions into knotty constellations of concerns and interests. She casts her net wide, continually finding new avenues to travel down.



Collectively, her work offers a reprisal to 20th-century assumptions about the purpose of abstraction by embracing rather than refusing the world outside her studio door. While largely absent in explicit imagery, Popova paintings are a type of landscape in themselves. In previous work Popova has taken the soil surrounding nuclear power stations and explored defunct quarries to source stones that she grinds to produce colourful pigments. Nuclear energy is a frequent motif in the artist's practice, informed by her upbringing in Ozyorsk – a secret town, formed in the post-war period for the Soviet nuclear programme. Perhaps because of this freighted past, she is drawn to places with complex sediments. Resident in the UK for many years, Popova traces histories of the British landscape and its entangled geologies exploring its rich agricultural, mining and industrial heritages.

In her recent post-petrochemical paintings – emerging out of a residency at Girton College, Cambridge in 2017 – she eschews traditional pigments and oil entirely. These works incorporate washes of pigment sourced from the artist's various forays across the UK, including; ground down dried clay, ash from a woodland fire, brick dust, stones and shells. For her solo exhibition *Made Ground* at Cample Line Popova was drawn to the iron-rich stone found along the rivers Nith and Scaur, which provided a rich terracotta-like colour. In looking at them we look down at the ground; pondering how each – in its own way – is made: the movements of hands mimicking tectonic plates, glazing a mineral sediment.

Growing up in the Soviet Union and living in the UK for many years, Popova talks of a simultaneous sense of belonging to and dislocation from place. Landscape shapes our identity and sense of home in forcefully unconscious ways. We walk and work the land, its sensory affects – light, smell, sound and textures – imprinting themselves on our memories. Land is shared as folklore and symbolised through storytelling. Home is more than just a place we inhabit; it's a memory held in our muscles.

Dislocation from this unconscious connection can be traumatic. Historically we can think of land enclosures, which forcefully removed communities from common land. More recently we can look to the intense gentrification of our cities. Globally we can see

the forceful migration of communities and annihilation of land through war and ecocide manifesting untold tragedies. In 2002 environmental researcher and philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term solastagia from the latin words for comfort and suffering. This is a type of homesickness – felt by those still at home – for a once familiar landscape changed by climate change.

This ecological estrangement permeates Popova's recent paintings, which are imbued with solastagic affect. If much ecologically minded art takes a polemic approach Popova explores a more oblique terrain; she offers a tone rather than a message. Her paintings– made with linen from flax plants and pigments from the earth – is of nature as much as about it. Her work embodies rather than explains. The precarity articulated in the images is often extended in the way she installs them; leaning and wonky, accompanied by off-cuts and remnants of chairs and stools. Sometimes her work is laid on the floor. Everything is balanced, perhaps exhausted, propped and precarious as though a gust of wind could blow it all away.

By refusing to use traditional pigments and solvents that are often highly toxic (and expensive), Popova roots her painting in pre-industrial traditions. These new paintings offer a kind of detox – echoed through a plaintive approach – side stepping our addiction to carbon dependency as well as consumerism. Her paintings are reconciliatory; embracing a form of ethical abstraction that acknowledges rather than disavows the planet.

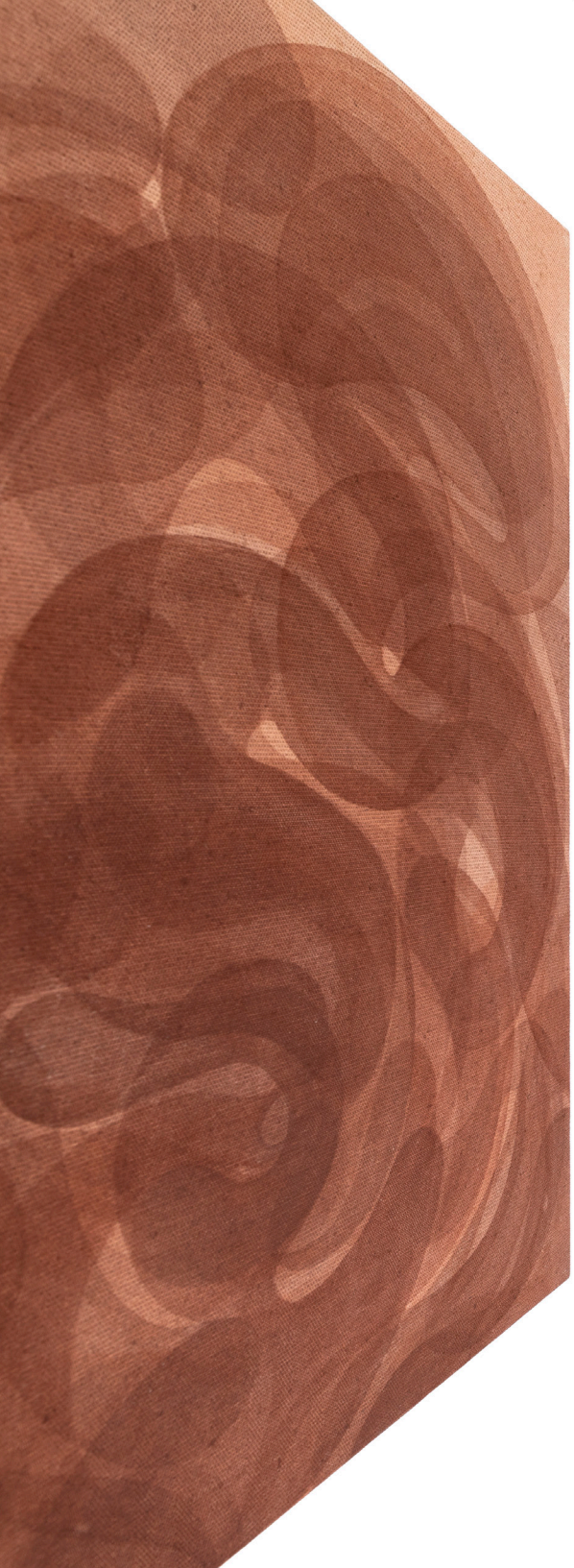
Popova's work performs a double archaeology digging into the earth and into the past, ecology and art history. Much like archaeology, this work is about time and its impact on place; how natural and human activity is archived in the soil. Her work doesn't exist in a world of limitless progression. It is precarious; viewed hazily through the collective grogginess of our 21st-century hangover. We face a turning point and Popova, alongside many other artists, writers and scientists, are attempting to articulate a new type of earth consciousness; making art as nature rather than about it.

In the 19th-century figures such as Charles Babbage and Eleonor Sidgwick believed that natural materials such as granite could act as a sound recorder; a literal archive of people's spoken words. Ghostly



apparitions were playbacks rather than messages from beyond the grave. While scientifically dubious, the stone tape theory is a resonant metaphor: the ground we walk is an archive of our past activities. We just need to know how to read it. In this sense, when we look at Popova's paintings we can see them as speakers. Look (and listen) close enough, attuning yourself to their mineralogy and they'll you everything you need to know.

1. Futurism and Constructivism were art movements in the early 20th century. The former grew out of Italy and the later was formed in Russia. In both movements artists merged representation of modern life with abstraction to capture the energies of 20th-century industrialism.





Thornhill. 55.242663, -3.773200, 2022



Cample 1, 2022





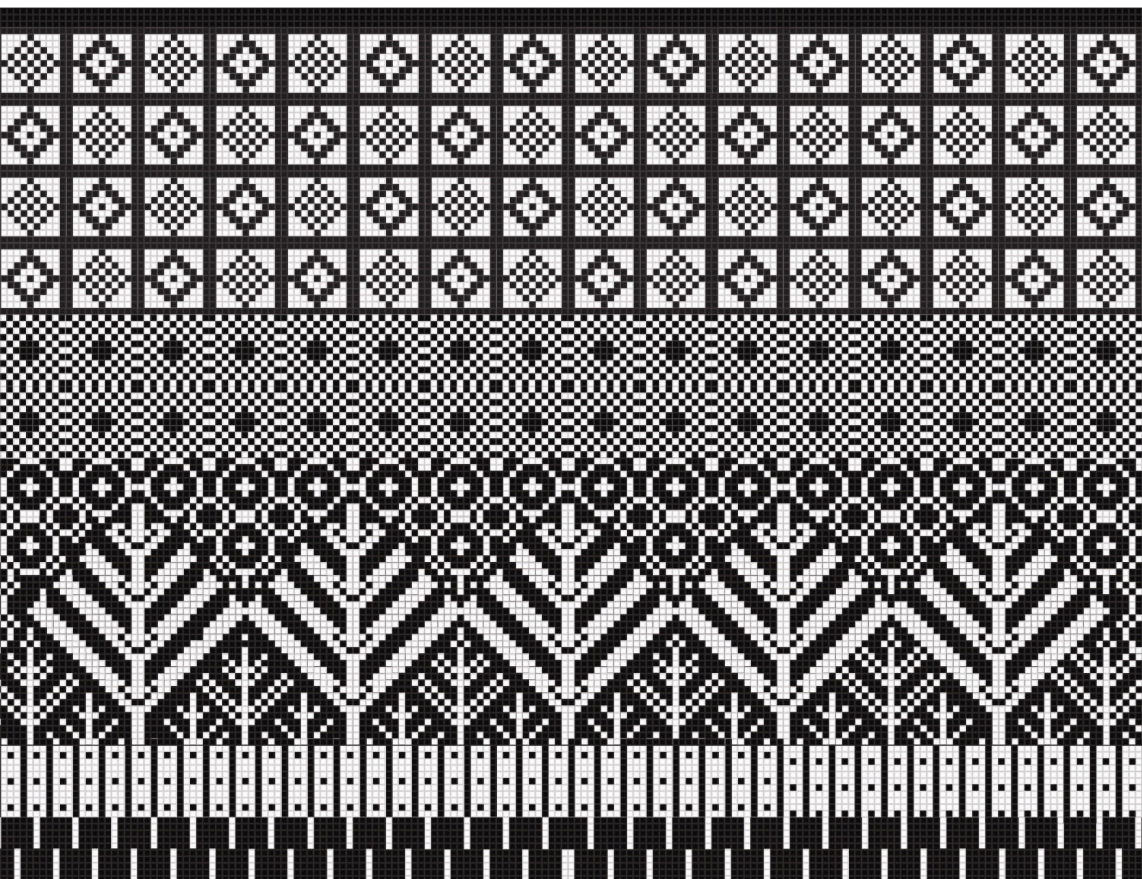


Spruce, design for the knitting, 2022

List of works

1. **Scaur Bridge**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on cotton canvas
80 x 60.5 cm
2. **Thornhill. 55.242663, -3.773200**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
80 x 60 cm
3. **Penpont**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on cotton canvas
56 x 45.5 cm
4. **Scaur, 55.226374, -3.811730**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on cotton canvas
137 x 106 cm
5. **Sun trap, 55.226374, -3.811730**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on cotton canvas
28 cm diameter
6. **Sunshine Corner I**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on cotton canvas
28 cm diameter
7. **Sunshine Corner II**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on cotton canvas
28 cm diameter
8. **Cample 1**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on cotton
43 x 33 cm
9. **Nith**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on Irish Linen
81 x 66 cm
10. **Cample 2**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on cotton
43 x 33 cm
11. **Kings Quarry**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on vintage Irish Linen
and found brick
117 x 96 cm
12. **Drumlanrig**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on Irish Linen
90 x 70 cm
13. **Thornhill 55.285234, -3.770300**
Post Petrochemical paintings series,
2022
earth pigment on cotton
60.5 x 50.5 cm
14. **Spruce, 2022**
cotton cord knitting
109 x 161 x 2 cm
15. **Hunting Scene with a Ray Cat,**
2022
Jacquard woven throw
Limited edition of 28
220 x 160 cm

Dimensions are given H x W x D



Sanquhar design (detail), yet to be realised

Yelena Popova works across a range of media, including painting, tapestry, video and installation. There is a stress placed upon the notion of balance within her work, whether political, aesthetic or metaphysical. Reflecting her upbringing in the USSR, she is influenced by the tenets of Russian Constructivism, while often seeking to discuss the constant development of industrialism and the landscape of contemporary capitalism. Growing up in a secret Soviet nuclear settlement, Popova has turned her attention to nuclear history and heritage undertaking series of research trips around decommissioned nuclear power plants in the UK to produce *The Scholar Stones Project* commissioned by Holden Gallery, Manchester in 2020.

Yelena was born in the Urals in the USSR, and has lived in the UK for over twenty years. She now lives and works in Nottingham. She graduated with an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art in 2011. Her work was included in *Slow Painting* curated by Martin Herbert for Hayward Gallery touring programme (2019) and in *Vitamin P3 (New Perspectives in Painting)* published by Phaidon (2016). She was shortlisted for the Arts Foundation Award in Painting and was included in *100 Painters of Tomorrow* published by Thames and Hudson (2014). Yelena has attended a number of residencies, among them Girton College; The Art House, Wakefield; CCA Andratx, Mallorca. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Landscapes of Power*, Philipp von Rosen, Cologne; *The Scholar Stones Project*, Holden Gallery, Manchester (2020); *Her Name is Prometheus*, L'étranger, London; *Townlets*, Art House Wakefield (2018); *After Image*, Nottingham Contemporary (2016) and *Unsensed*, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle (2015). She has recently designed a woven stage curtain for Solway Hall in Whitehaven as part of public art commissions programme *Deep Time—Commissions for the Lake District Coast*, launching in 2023.



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Above: *Sun trap*, 55.226374, -3.811730, 2022
Left: 55.285234, -3.770300 *Thornhill*, 2022

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YELENA POPOVA THANKS:

Max and Stuart Hodges, George Vasey, Irina Miloserdova, Tina Fiske, Briony Anderson, Rose, Jean and David Osbaldeston, the rivers Nith, Scour, Cample and the land

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