

The importance of place

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By [Roxane Permar](#), Artist

I was born in the United States, then lived and worked in London for many years before discovering Shetland. I fell in love with Shetland for its sense of community and extraordinary

relationship with the land and sea.

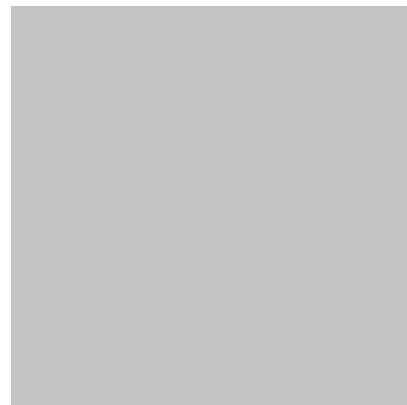
During my annual visits to Shetland, I would walk every day to a particular hilltop burial cairn to draw (if it wasn't raining). I found a deep empathy with the elements there and finally decided to move to Shetland in 2000.

Living in Shetland has positively affected my ways of working which have changed over the years in response to world events, evolving practices in contemporary art and my personal situation. I work in response to places, contexts, and situations, so I've never had one way of working nor used a singular medium.

There are many ways to describe my art practice, including social art practice, art in context, socially engaged art or situated practice. I see my practice as an art of place because it is the importance of place that has always underpinned it. Importantly, my understanding of place includes the

people who are connected to their place through work, history, or everyday living.

People have always been important to what I do, both in my art practice and my teaching. My art practice informs my teaching, and in turn teaching enriches my artwork. My current teaching in art and social practice at UHI Shetland is relational, characterised by collaboration and reciprocity, key qualities of social art practice.



Images from
Landscape in Pain

My most recent and ongoing work is called *Landscape in Pain*. It is a series of digital drawings and films I have been making since March 2021 in response to the current construction of the Viking Energy Wind Farm on Shetland's Mainland. This wind farm is industrial scale and will become one of the largest onshore wind farms in Europe. Many of us in Shetland believe its scale is wholly inappropriate for Shetland's diminutive landmass.

I started the work shortly before I was invited to be part of a project between Shetland and Swiss artists. I was paired with the performance artist Dorothea Rust who liked ideas I was exploring in *Landscape in Pain*. We found common ground very quickly, sharing feelings of grief both for destruction of the landscape and

personal loss, as we had each recently lost our mothers.

We explored ideas related to our bodies, our pain, and the visible devastation of the landscape. We considered the complexity of pain, the many kinds of pain and how it is variously felt. Through writing, film and image making we sought to find ways to articulate pain while engaging in processes of mending and healing, treating the scars in the landscape left by human violation and destruction.

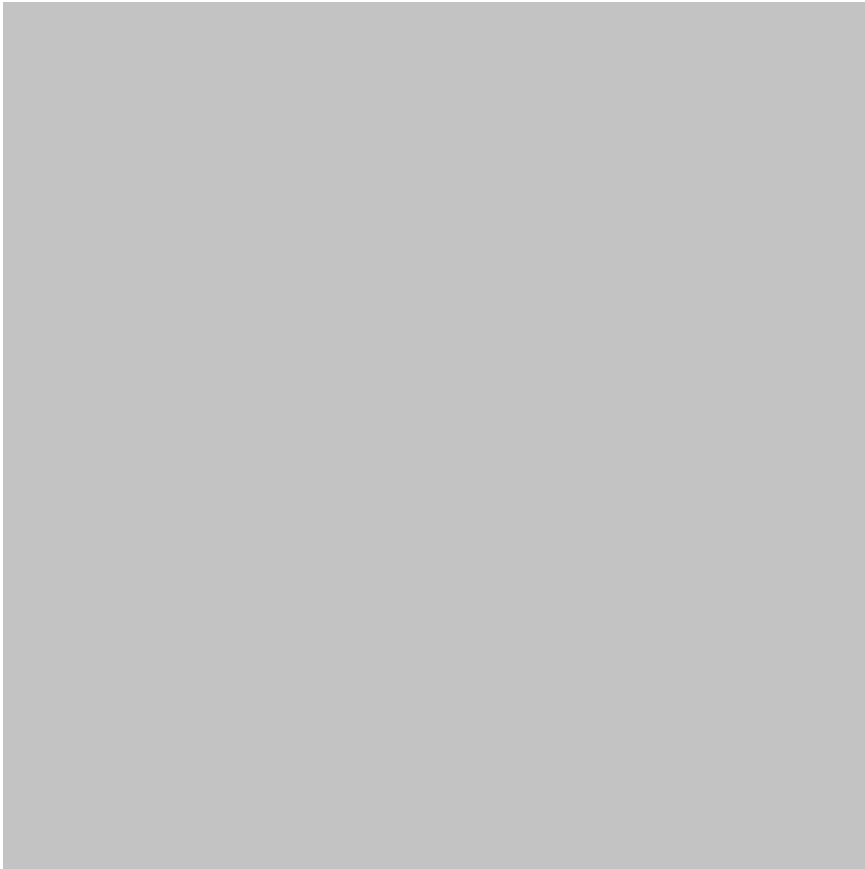
This work addresses an issue which is highly controversial in Shetland for a variety of reasons. It divided our community from the time of its initial proposal and continues to do so. In the face of this ongoing debate, I'm not afraid to say what I think publicly. And with age, my confidence has increased to do so.

I have an acute awareness of what can happen when people don't speak out,

shaped by many years of travel and work in the former USSR. I feel a duty to speak up, as increasingly I fear the lessons of history have been forgotten in our society.

Much of my work is full of challenge. I have in the past been involved with collaborative work that has become so controversial it was impossible for those of us involved to carry on. I've learned that friendships and people are more important than the artwork. Equally, it can be crucial to complete projects despite challenging circumstances.

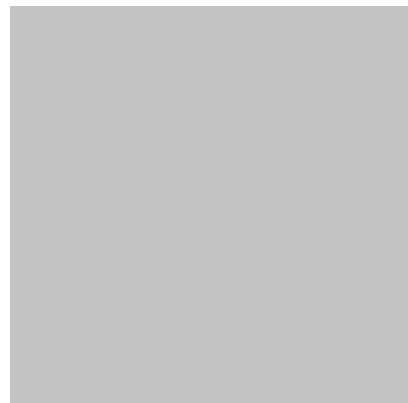
I've also learned over time not to rush things. I suppose being older has given me patience to let things take their course and to not necessarily force them. I try to share this experience with my students, stressing that socially engaged art is slow, and building genuine collaborative relationships can take years.



From Cold War Projects. A socially engaged project based on activities undertaken by civilian volunteers in the Royal Observer Corps between 1961 and 1991. Recount, Sumburgh Post. In collaboration with Susan Timmins, Roxane created three bunker covers knitted from wool and glow-in-the-dark thread that sat in stark contract to the surrounding landscape.



Northern Exchange was based in Iceland in four communities located near NATO



Detail of a panel created to be part of a geodesic dome, situated at Hofdi

radar installations.

House in Reykjavik, site of the 1986 summit meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan

Over time the way that I work with people has changed. In early participatory works I designed a strong visual aesthetic and invited participants to create elements which became part of a larger installation. In recent work my ways of working with people have expanded in response to the collaborative processes we create together, as in [Cold War Projects](#), my ongoing collaboration with the artist Susan Timmins.

Recent projects involve work that is very different from what I would have ever done or thought to do on my own, e.g., the short pilot project, *Nordic Connections: learning from the past to shape the future (2021-22)*, with

partners from Norway and Unst – the most northerly island in Shetland. It includes teachers and secondary pupils from Baltasound Junior High School in Unst and Onøy/Lurøy school in Norway; researchers from UHI and Nord University Nesna Campus as well as members of the Unst community.

My field of social art practice is dynamic, responsive, and open to change. It is full of uncertainty and ambiguity. I used this idea in the title for my inaugural lecture when I was made a professor last year by the University of the Highlands and Islands. It not only describes the nature of social art practice but me as an academic.

I am comfortable in the way I see myself first and foremost as a visual artist. I work in academia because I believe in education as an instrument of social change.

I don't think I will ever retire. I don't

see how artists ever can!

Article written by [Roxane Permar](#),
Artist

Roxane Permar is an artist and lecturer who has worked in the field of public art and socially engaged practice for over 30 years. Her career has been based in the UK, where she lived and worked in London before moving to Scotland in 1998. Her practice is situated locally, nationally, and internationally.,

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