

Argentea Gallery

A Q&A between Sayako Sugawara & Anna Sparham May 2020

As we begin tentatively to configure life beyond the more restricted lockdown, how are you envisioning things might shape up for you in the short term, generally and with respect to your practice?

Much of what has been happening since early March has been hard to process. I am taking each day as it comes as the view out of my window is still the same, but it is really hard to imagine the extent of change that is taking place.

As for my practice, I will continue to make the most of the time I have in my home studio. I have been fortunate enough to be able to bury myself in this and it has been helping me stay sane. I have also engaged in, at times existential, online dialogue with peers discussing and comparing our work and the impact of lockdown on our practice. I have taken the conversation further to question myself and to evaluate the ideas that have emerged during the lockdown.

You've been continuing to post on Instagram with images made in your living room – so has lockdown offered a strangely creative period for you?

A large part of my practice has consistently been taking everyday encounters as the starting point of ideas. I've always seemed to work well within restrictions and constraints. Even though I haven't had access to a darkroom, being on a lockdown at home with all my art materials and collected objects, and minus the running around, has been fortunate compared to many other people. I have also been very lucky that the light in my room has been so beautiful. For two weeks before the lockdown I was ill and self-isolating in this room, inevitably watching the dramatic light show happening every day. Once I had recovered, I started playing with the simplest idea of catching light and shadows on a piece of paper. I have been running workshops in this 'capturing light' activity for quite some time now, but I had never done this in my own room, as I am never here during the day. I then realised that I was in the best place I could be with endless light and shadows to catch.

This period of lockdown has given me time for sustained thinking and making, time which is usually hard to find. I have had the opportunity to look through objects I've collected over the years; for example, small stones, pieces of glass and ceramics from the Thames, and understood why I have picked them up.

The strangeness and helplessness in this period have been very hard to deal with. My living room has been a safe place for me, and I have been finding myself becoming introverted through daily practice.

Luckily, I am isolating with one of my sons, which has helped in keeping some sense of normality.



HH-FH

Hampstead Heath – Forest Hill, from the series *Portals*, 2018

***Portals* is an ongoing project of yours, from which Argentea sells editioned prints. How did this project come about? When collaging these images, how do you choose which two to combine? Is there a specific look or feeling you're trying to achieve?**

The idea of *Portals* came about when I was going through prints of images accumulated on Instagram for a takeover entitled *photographs of photographs*.

Although I joined Instagram relatively late, I was already taking progressively more photos using the phone camera. I began to appreciate this platform and began using it as a sketchbook or a visual diary of the everyday.

When I saw the printed images of places and occurrences, I felt the need to create pathways between the physical and temporal places in the images, so that they are not just flat but have further dimensions within them; closer to how our memories function. That is, not just a stack of flat images piled up on top of each other but having complex dimensions and multitudes of interconnections, like dreams.

This was also a way to make the impossible possible.

The idea of portals is a very important theme for me. Threading the images together. Of the familiar but a little different. Just like in a dream.

The locations range from Forest Hill, London to Italian and Japanese cities, reflecting presumably locations of personal relevance. Were the images in each of these places taken with this project in mind, or did it all form more organically?

The project grew much more organically. The accumulation of everyday encounters and occurrences slowly became *Portals* through the process explained in the previous answer. These are places and images from my everyday life, except of course for the visits to my native Japan and holidays. Some places are connected to my past and others are becoming new memories.

When the images started to accumulate, and I printed them out, I found a tension that was created when images from geographically different places were juxtaposed.

It started to make me curious about the connections between all the different landscapes and places we contain within ourselves.

The phone itself begins to echo this, as it becomes a repository of our precious moments, things and places we would like to remember.

Portals is a way of creating pathways among these different places and the viewer as a traveller can come and go between them all.



WH – T, West Hampstead – Tokyo



M – N, Montepulciano - Nara

The size of the images and tone – printed on expired photographic paper – for me echo darkroom prints from the mid-20th century, despite their contemporary visual elements. Is this an aesthetic you sought, playing with temporal as well as locational juxtaposition?

I am a big fan of mid-20th century darkroom prints both aesthetically and in terms of the energy and the spirit of experimentation in the medium as a whole.

The method is partly a little challenge I set: unless you examine the work closely, you may not even notice. I wanted to challenge the viewer's perception by making traditional darkroom prints from digital phone photography. I also needed to satisfy my own curiosity in discovering how, or even if, the technique would work.

The fogging of the expired paper meant I had to regain the image by bleaching each print, an unpredictable process that meant that I had to treat each print as a unique image. This extended and time-consuming method increased the opportunity for dialogue with the prints in the darkroom.



HH – N, Hampstead Heath – Nara, from the series *Portals*, 2018

Printing my own images is central to my practice as a creative process.

I genuinely embrace that I live in a time when different processes are accessible and they are all there for us to use - from analogue and digital, cameraless photography, to gifs. These all become creative tools.

Your series *Sporenland* derived from original glass negatives of alpine photographer Heinrich Schildknecht (1874-1959). The negative format is a personal favourite of mine and you're currently working on a new series which sees you return to these glass plates. How are you using them to create the new work?

The glass negatives are beautiful objects and loaded with history and memories in themselves.

When I began working with Heinrich's glass negatives, I started by studying them on a lightbox and then later in the darkroom.

Heinrich was a very accomplished Alpine photographer, hiking to the highest peak in Austria with his clients during the season and taking group portraiture at summit and along the way. Most of the negatives are in 6x8 format. It was a very special and intimate darkroom experience to encounter all the people that populate his images.

When working with the archive of a photographer there are negotiations to be made. There is a fine balance to be struck between respecting the original work, and yet finding a way to make your own work and create your own narrative. With this in mind I was able to approach this archive as "active", by focussing on the negatives as objects rather than on their content alone. So not only the subject of the negative is important but also the mould, scratches, dust and all other traces of time become part of the story.

Sporenland used the mould on the glass negatives to create an imaginary landscape which had formal association with Chinese and Japanese ink paintings. In response to this, I printed the series on Japanese Paper.

The current series THE PEAKS (working title) will continue to have elements of imaginary landscapes, along with suggestions of a narrative; a journey or expedition throughout the landscape.

The glass negatives will be used as a portal to access this imaginary expedition. In practical terms, once again, the archive will be examined in the darkroom as a series of objects, as carriers of the traces of time, each bearing their own memories.

When we last discussed this new work in progress, it was a marked contrast in scale to the smaller prints of Portals. How do you envision its final outcome?

I imagine the works to take advantage of and to incorporate the beautiful space at Argentea Gallery. A mixture of scales from installation to smaller works will be part of the narrative of THE PEAKS.

There seems to be a common thread in your work in that you're creating imaginary landscapes (and fictional narratives) from real ones. Is this a deliberate decision or does it come from your subconscious?

It is a mixture of both. The thread began during my residency at the Fortismere School where I worked with a couple of boxes of 'accidental archives' which were to be discarded. The 'archive' consisted of outdated photography related objects, ranging from glass negatives of landscapes to plastic tongs and rusty timers. I start by researching objects factually, but at a certain point I start to have a subconscious dialogue with them, making observations and associations using the darkroom. Often during this process landscapes begin to emerge.

Finally, are there any artists, historical and contemporary, who have had a particular influence on your practice?

In brief, naturally Moholy Nagy and Man Ray's darkroom work is somewhere I regularly return to, along with Jean Cocteau's films. Burroughs and Gysin's photo collage pieces relating to the concept of time travel are also an inspiration. I admire Ellsworth Kelly's work, particularly the incorporation of chance mechanisms in his practice.

Contemporary artists that interest me include Jungjin Lee, particularly for her use of photographic print techniques, and Joan Fontcuberta, for his conceptual approach to the veracity of archives.