

JONATHAN BRENNAN 'DAYLIGHTING'

3-26 OCTOBER 2024

PS² BELFAST



DOCUMENTATION

‘Daylighting – Work in Progress’

Daylighting – Work in Progress took place in PS², Belfast (3-26 October 2024).

The exhibition comprised research and works in progress from Jonathan Brennan’s ongoing body of research around rivers, especially those in Belfast.

Through text, video, animation, archive, oral history, mapping, paint, drawing, installation, cyanotype, monotype and mixed media works, the artist looks at issues around ecology (how we experience/ manage rivers in urban areas); river ownership/ maintenance (rivers diverted/culverted by private ventures); river narratives and metaphors (rivers as a way of talking about other things, under the surface).

3 October: Exhibition opening. Live readings of:

‘(Not) Clowney-ing Around’.

Original text by Jonathan Brennan.

Read by Joseph Nawaz.

‘Farset’.

Extract of text by Ciaran Carson.

Read by Jane Morrow.

‘We Just Called It All Grass’.

Original text by Jonathan Brennan.

Read by Jonathan Brennan.

Special thanks to:

Jane Morrow

Davy Mahon

Peter Mutschler

Joanna Johnston

Sinéad Bhreathnach-Cashell

Johanna Leech

Catherine Devlin

Josheph Nawaz





Photo by Catherine Devlin

Reading & listening area. Belfast river map compiled from Rivers NI flood maps. Bespoke hi-vis vest with original Rivers logo.



Reading & listening area. OSB table, foldable zines on sugar paper, headphones with audio interviews on the subject of rivers.

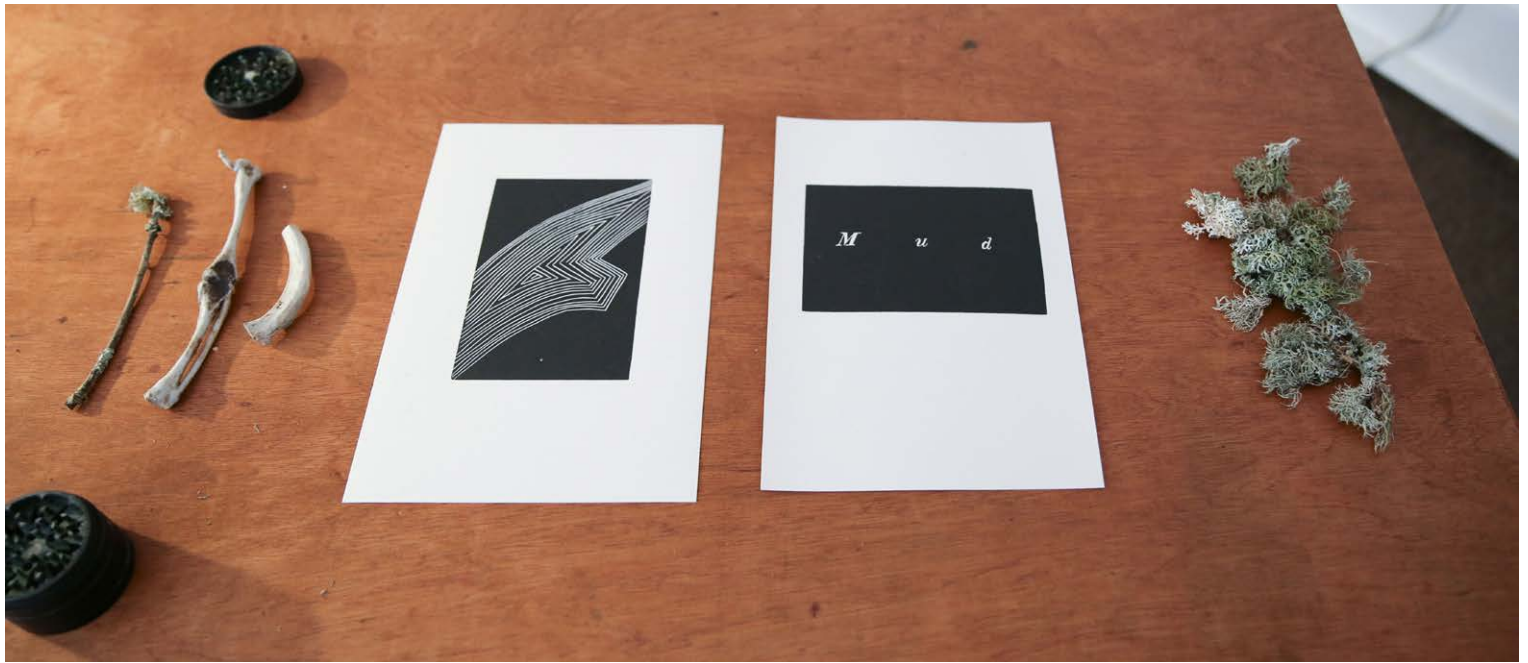


Close-up of folded zine with original text and photographs.



Photo by Catherine Devlin

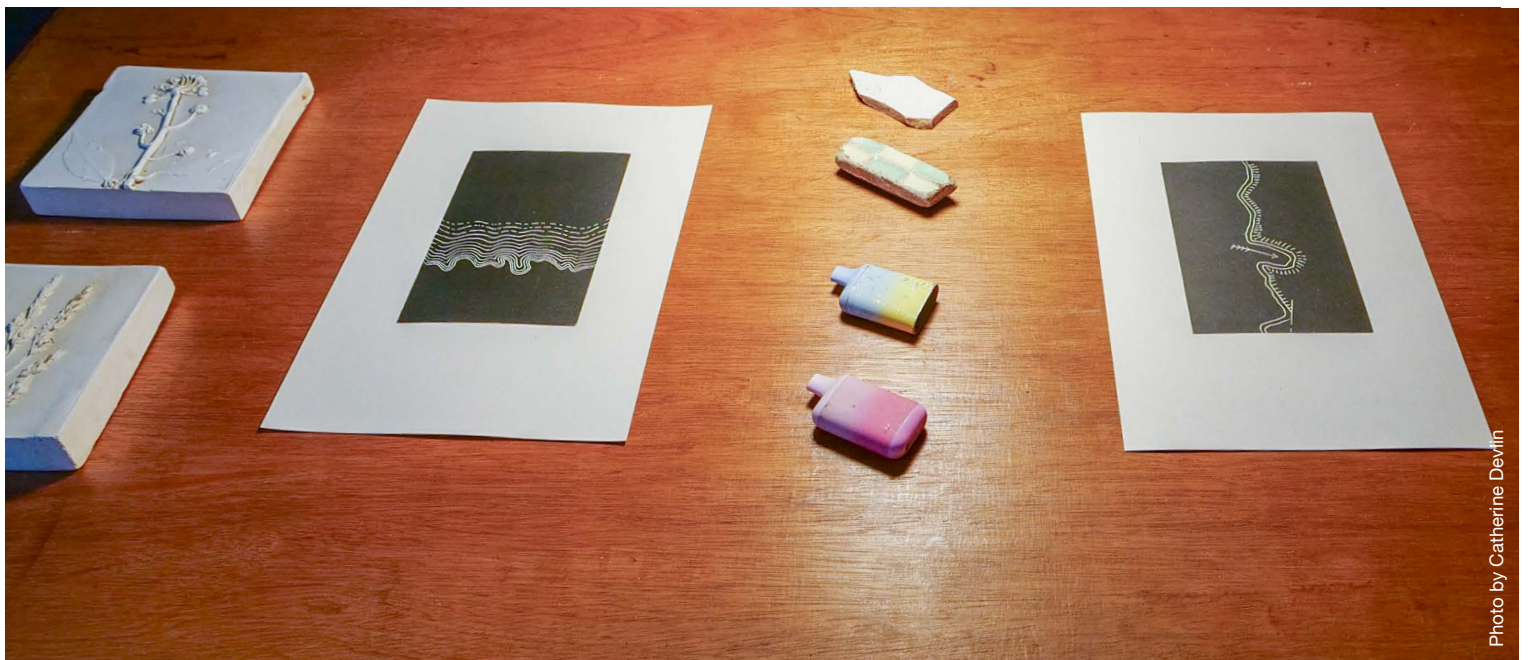
Table top (244 x 60 x 1.8 cm. 1.8 x 4.5cm lath). Underframe (74 x 54 x 200cm). Anglepoise lamp, found objects, plaster casts, linocut prints.



Found objects ('herb grinder', twig, plastic bone, bone, lichen) and linocut prints.



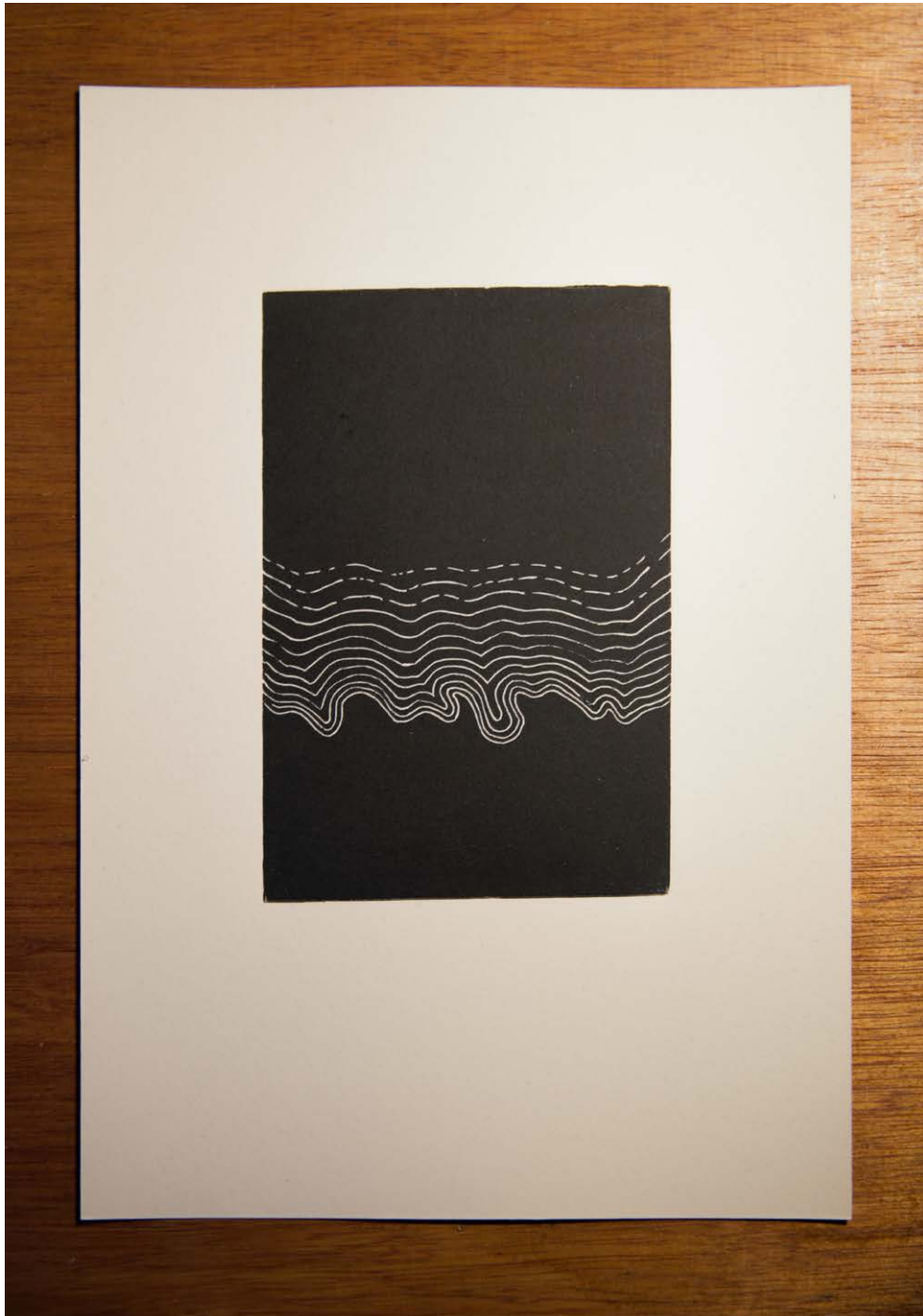
Found objects (oyster shells) and linocut prints.



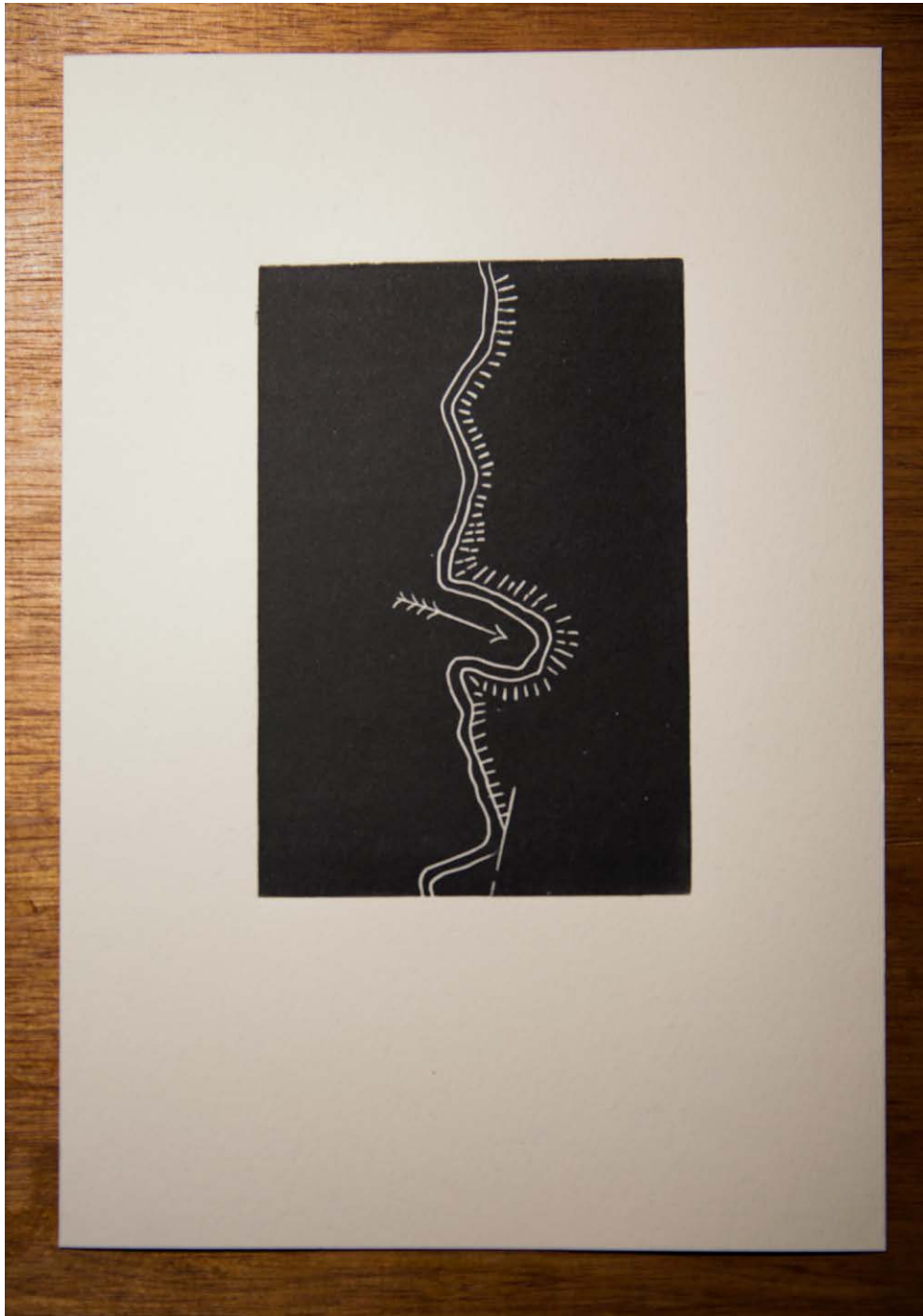
Plaster casts, linocut prints, found objects (Lost Mary vapes and tiles).



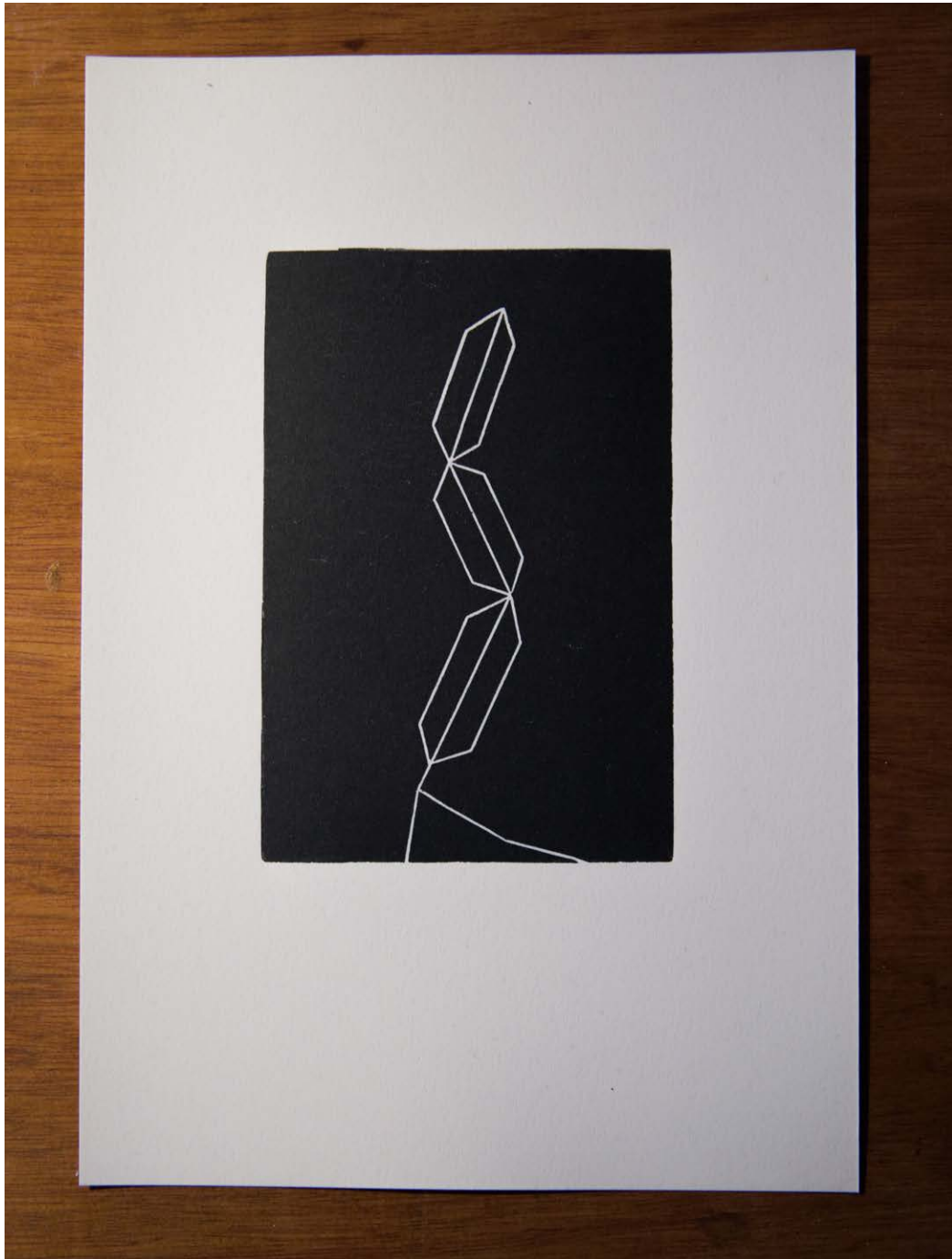
Plaster casts, found objects (Lost Mary vapes and tiles).



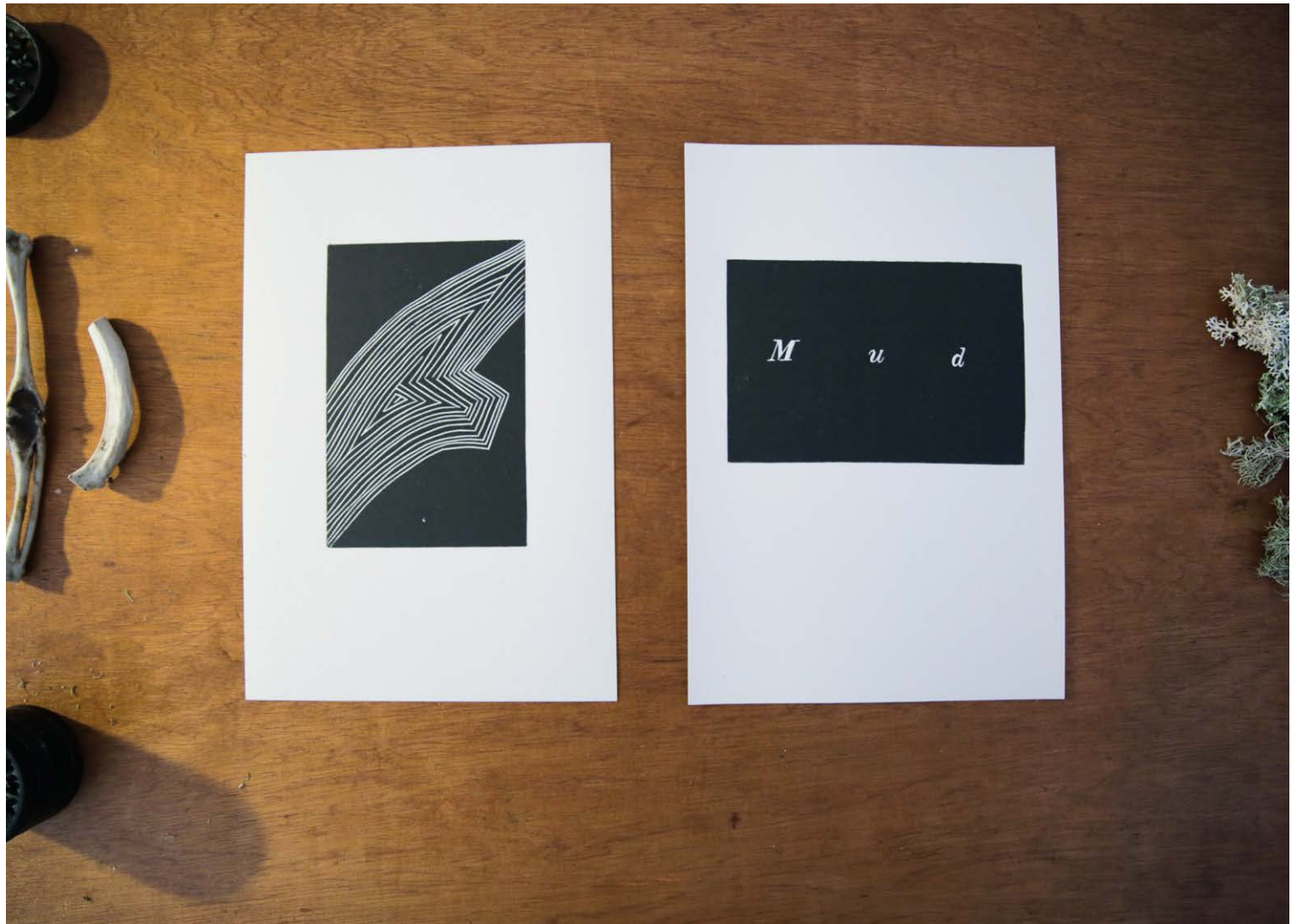
Linocut print.



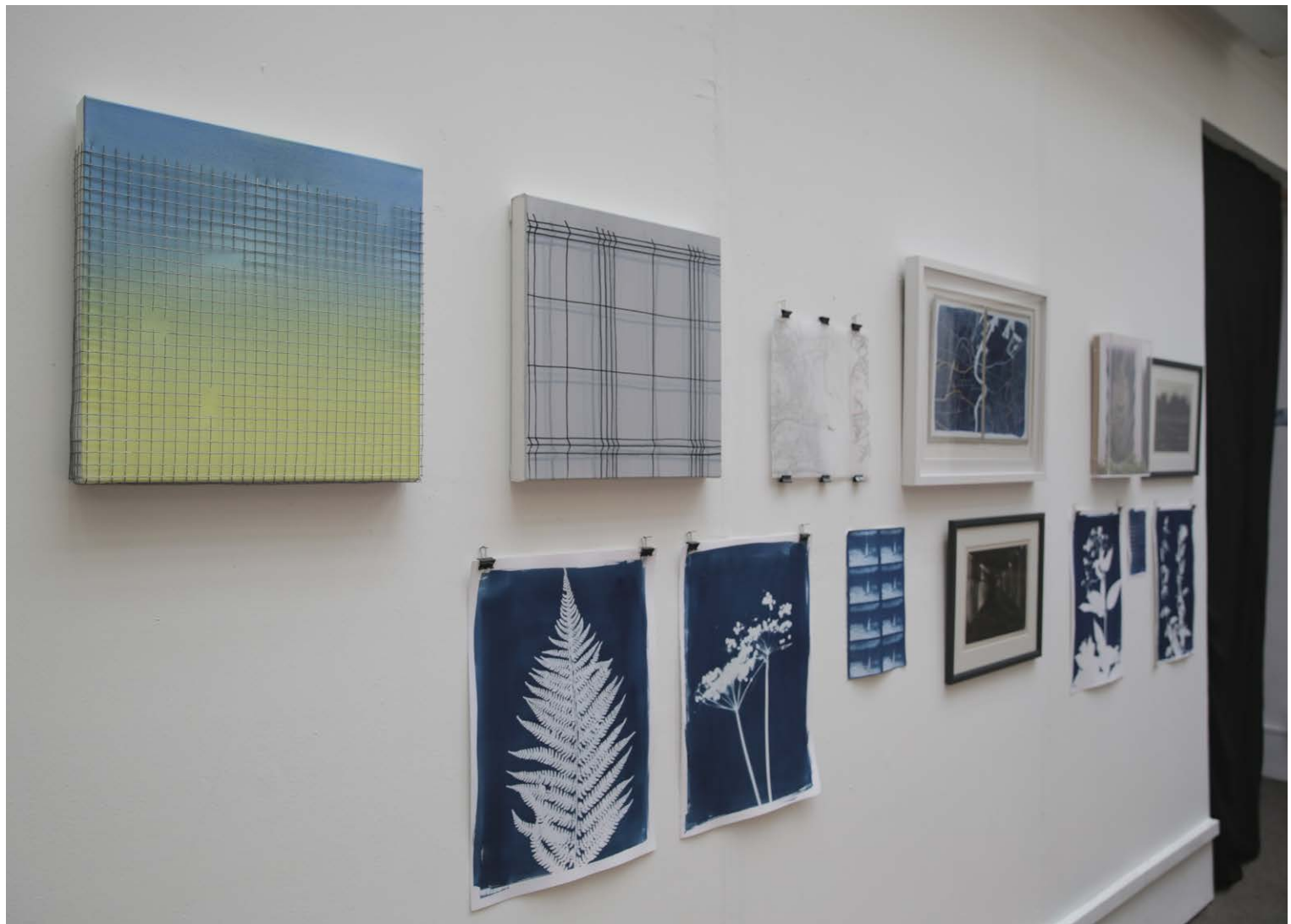
Linocut print.



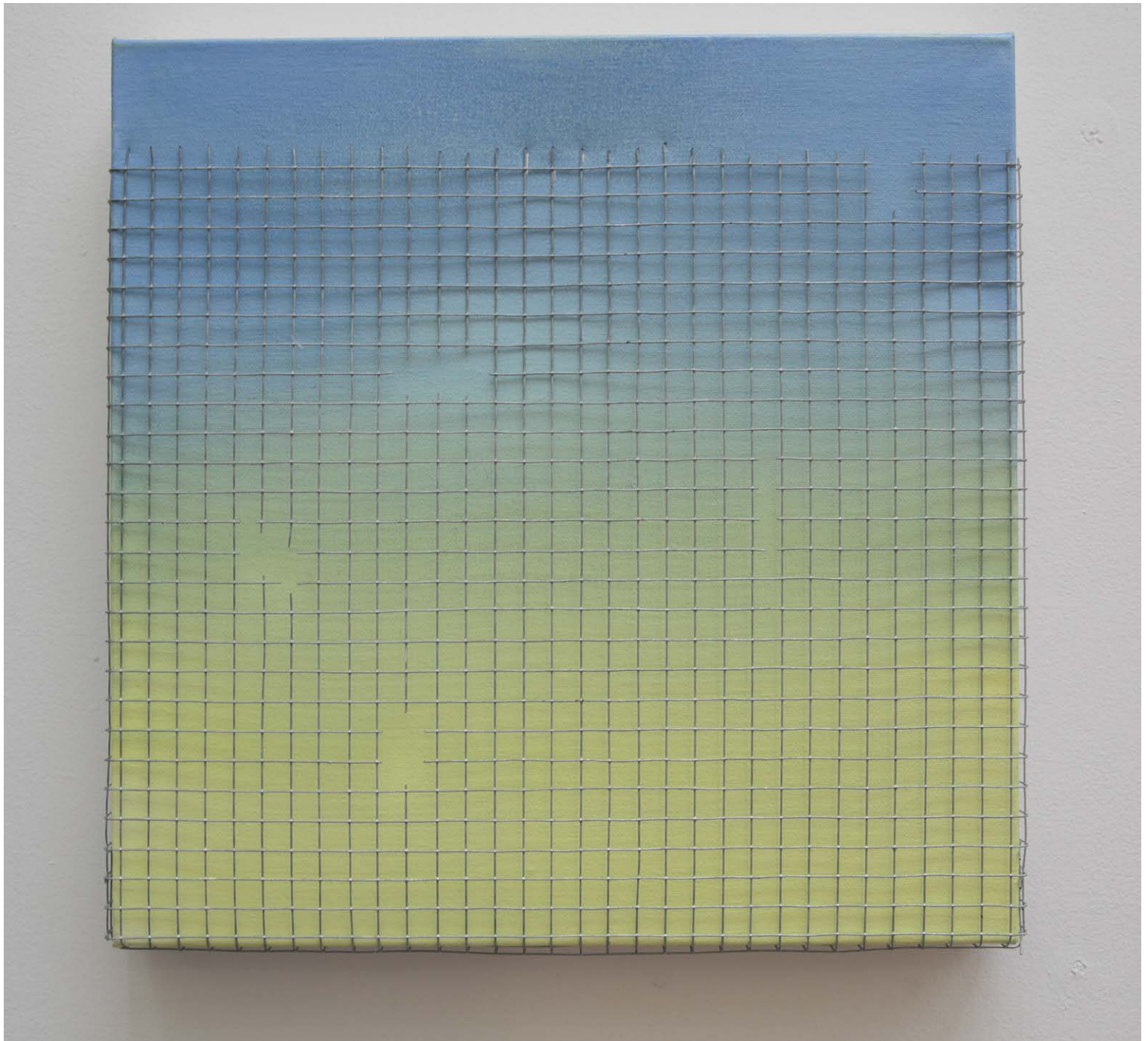
Linocut print.



Linocut prints.



Mixed media, prints, animation frames.



'Untitled'. Oil on canvas, galvanised wire mesh (40 x 40cm)



From top left: '2666' (mixed media, 30 x 40cm), 'Lagan Currach' (monotype print, 50x 40cm), 'Untitled (Himalayan Balsam)' (cyanotype print, 40 x 50cm), 'Untitled (wire mesh)' (cyanotype print, 15 x 20cm) and 'Untitled' (nettles)' (cyanotype print, 40 x 50cm)



Photo by Catherine Devlin

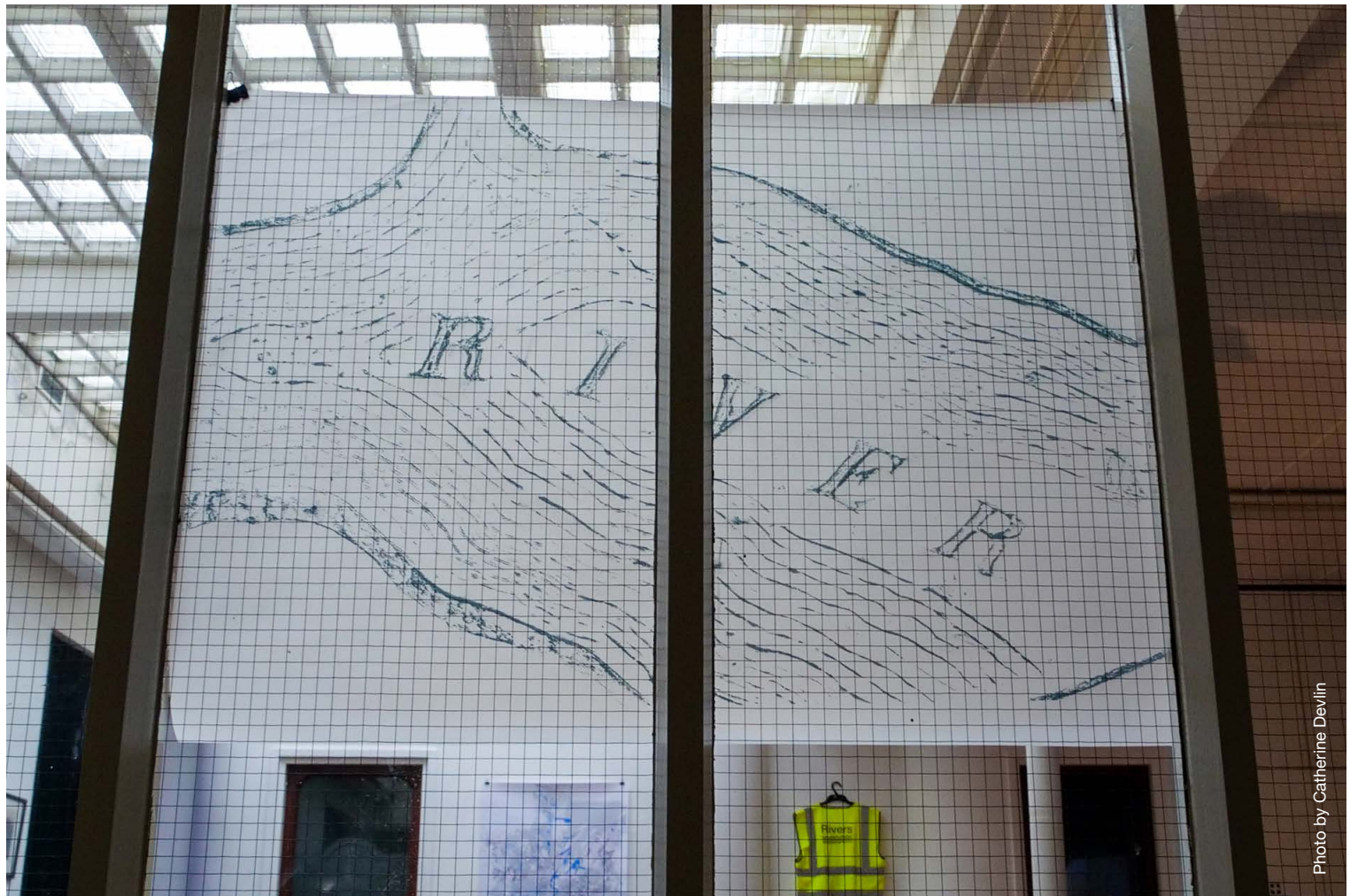


Photo by Catherine Devlin

Screenprint on tracing paper from rubbing taken at the site of the Blackstaff river.



Iron-on decal on high-vis gilet. Original 'Rivers' logotype.



Photo by Catherine Devlin

'Riverrun - Knock Culvert' video diptych (38:48). 'Underneath the Arches'. Acrylic on canvas (90 x 90).



Photo by Catherine Devlin

'Underneath the Arches'. Acrylic on canvas (90 x 90). Project space view.

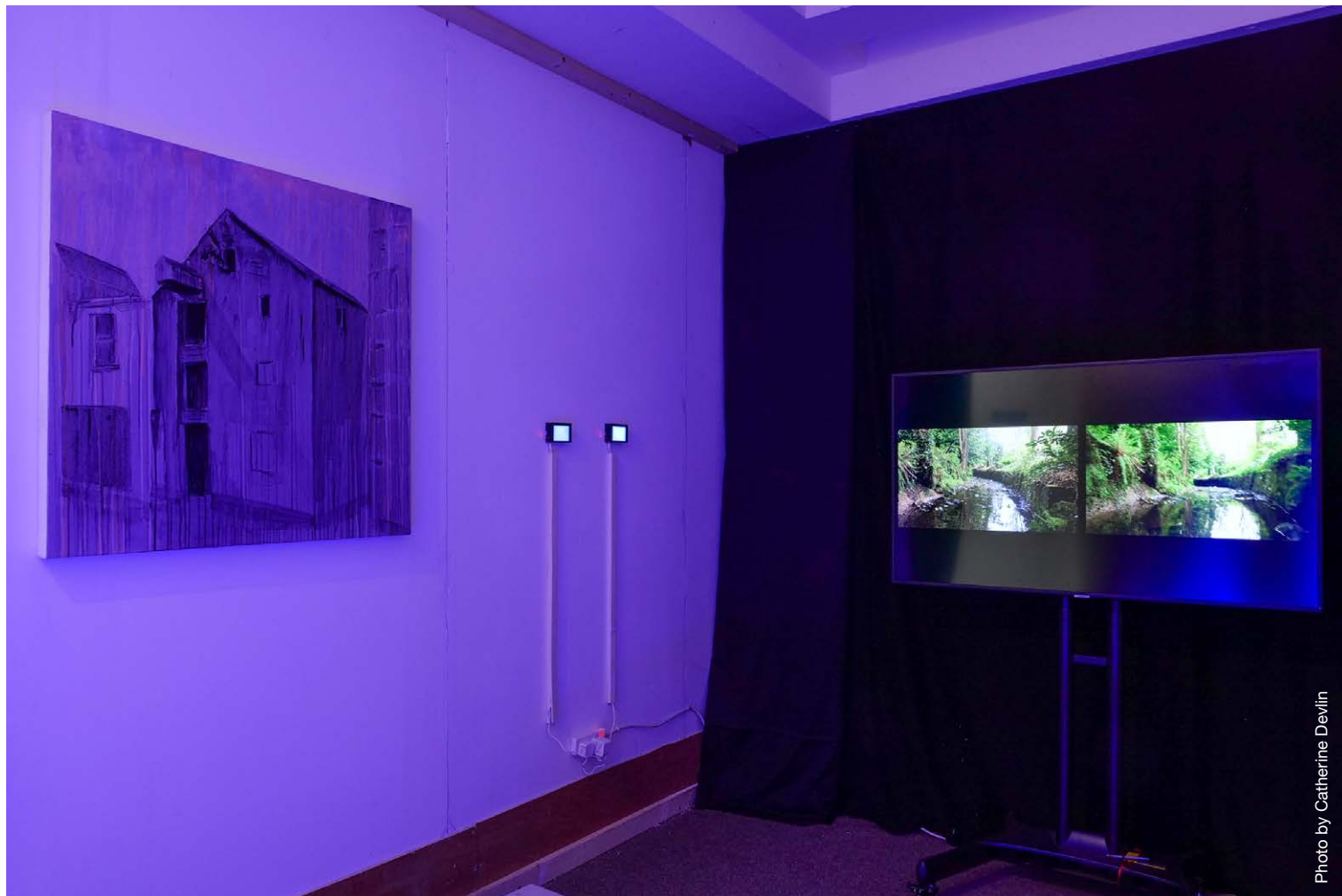


Photo by Catherine Devlin

'Sense of Place'. Acrylic on canvas (90 x 90 cm). 'Riverrun - Knock Culvert' video diptych (38:48).



'Sense of Place'. Acrylic on canvas (90 x 90 cm).
Project space view (in blue light).



Photo by Catherine Devlin

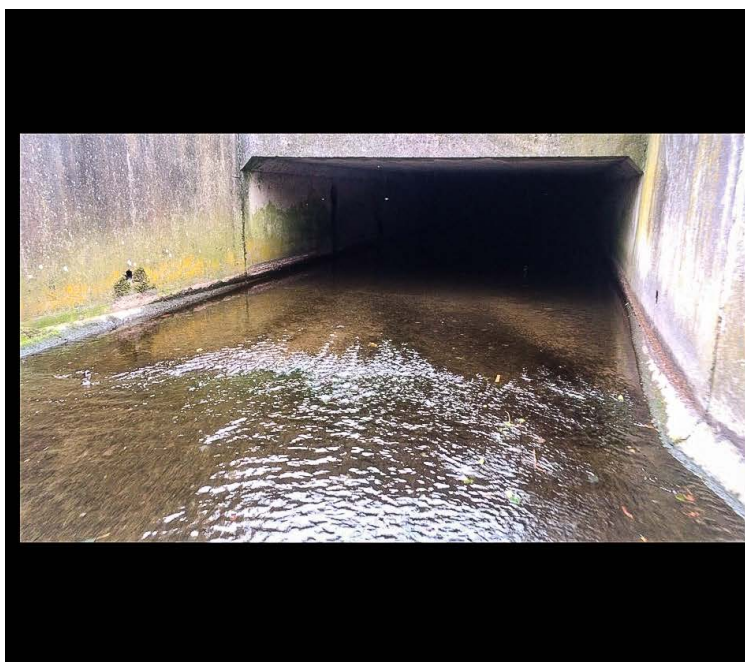
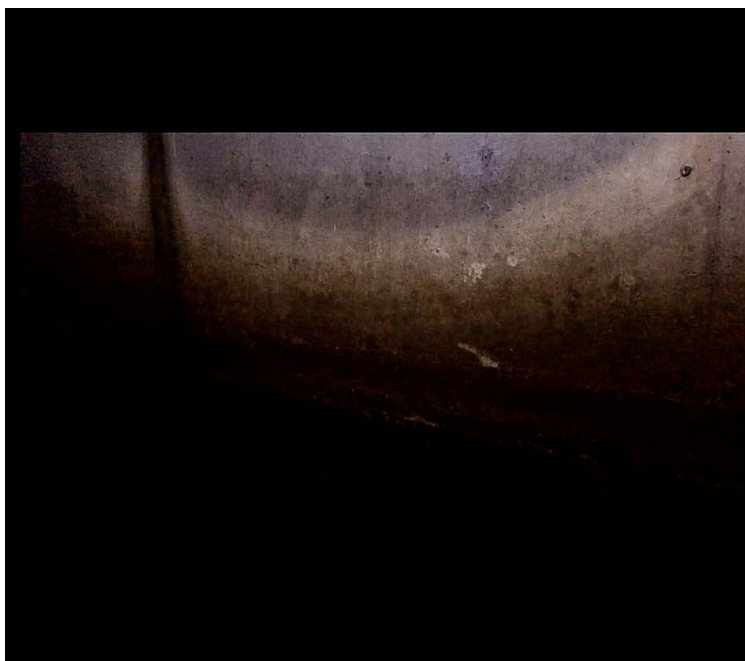
'Sense of Place'. Acrylic on canvas (90 x 90 cm).
Project space view (in blue light) - detail.



Photo by Catherine Devlin

Untitled. Blue leds, bulldog clips, Indian ink on tracing paper (84 x 59 cm).





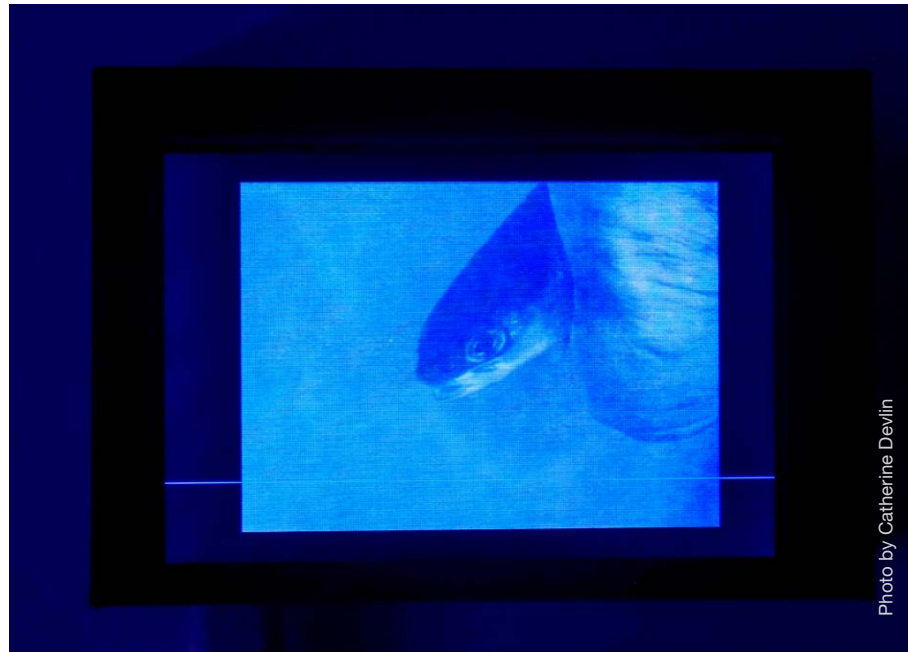


Photo by Catherine Devlin

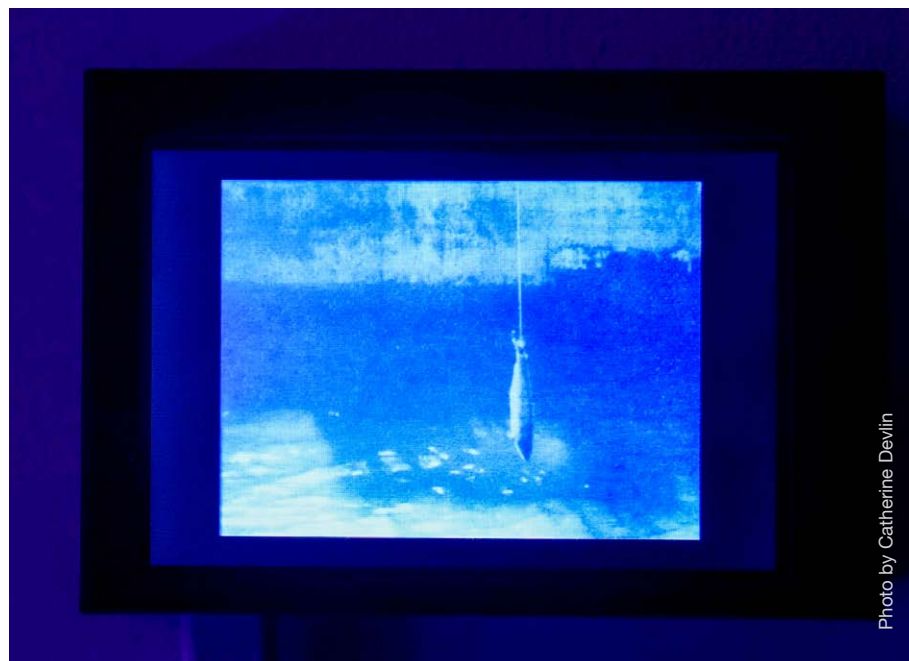


Photo by Catherine Devlin

Archive footage of Lagan salmon as looping cyanotype animations.
Northern Ireland Screen Digital Film Archive footage, cyanotype prints,
Raspberry Pis.

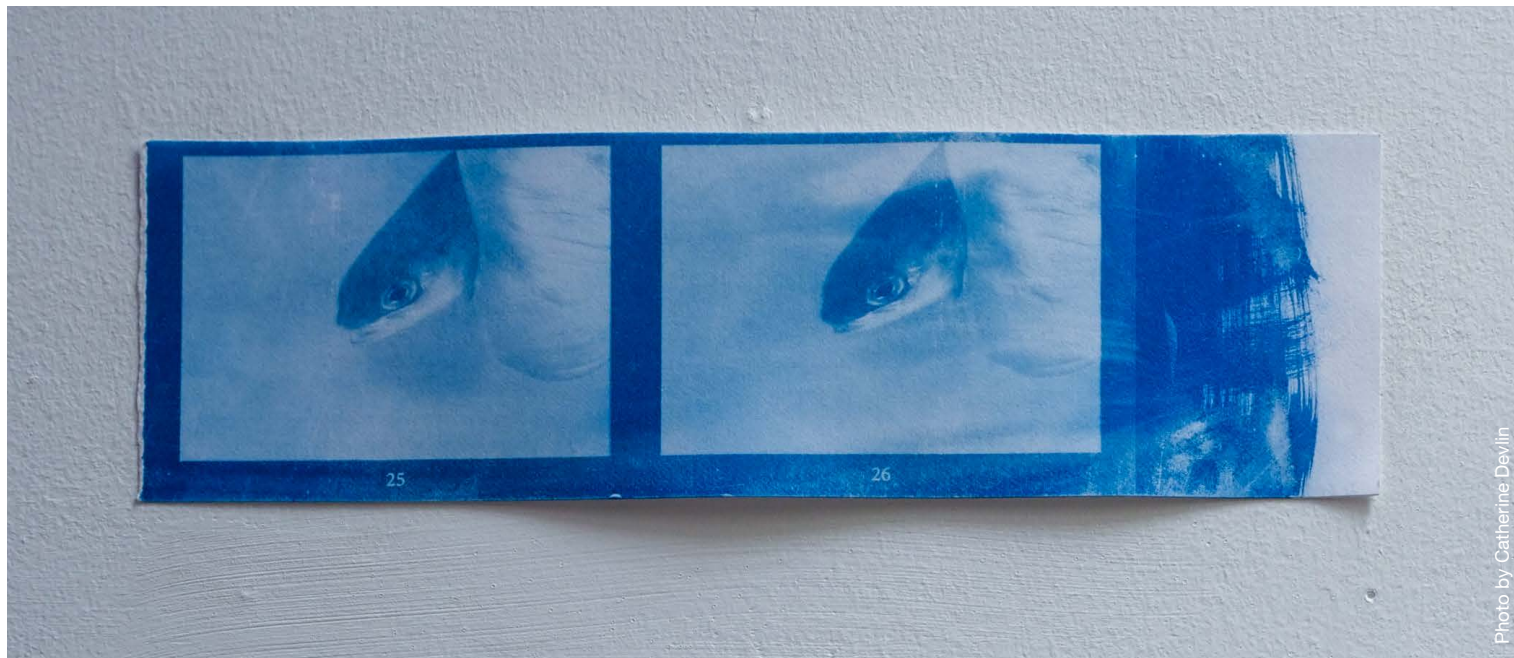
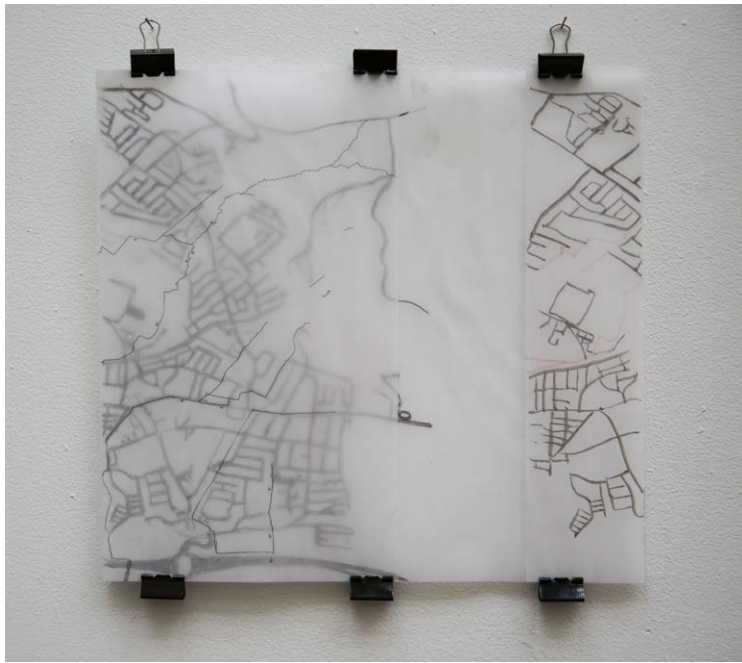


Photo by Catherine Devlin

Cyanotype animation frames (21 x 12 cm).



Site specific installation 'Night Pollinator'. Found imagery, cyanotype prints in resin.



Untitled. Ink on tracking paper.



'Overflow/Underflow'. Cyanotype, eco-dyed skeins.





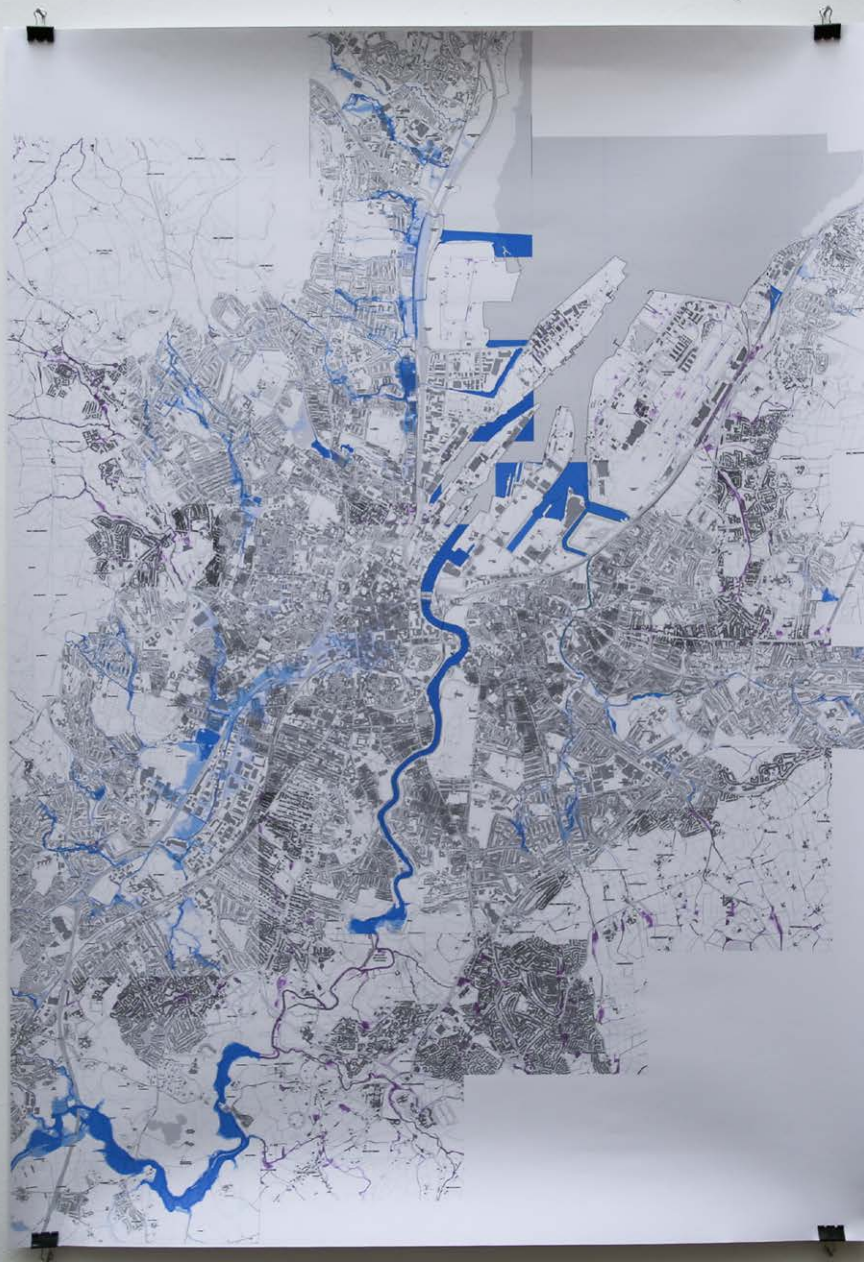
'2666' (mixed media, 30 x 40cm).



'Knock Culvert' (monotype print, 50x 40cm).



'Under Sandown' (monotype print, 50x 40cm).



100+ river and flood maps joined. Digital print (840 x 1190 cm.)



'Daylighting' video installation view.



Stills from 'Daylighting' video (16:12). Link to full video: <https://vimeo.com/1056456772/3a8f851f64>



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Interview Transcripts

I.

"Growing up – I know it was bad with the Troubles and all – but we kind of just kept ourselves to ourselves, you know? We knew everybody and we played football and all that. Our playground was really Botanic Gardens. Years ago, Botanic Gardens was not the way is now! It was just grown over... madness like... but we used to play over there all the time. When you were up about 14 or 15 we used to be able to get our pocket money and we all saved up and at the top of Ridgeway Street – this is sad looking back – there used to be a wee wine lodge, a wee thing that sold drink, at the top of Ridgeway street right on the corner, and we used to save all our money, all of us. And they used to sell cider in them big flagons. We used to buy them and drink in the Botanic Gardens and then when it was empty you brought the empty bottle back and you got a pound."

'We made wee rafts and we used to race each other up and down the Lagan!'

"Just in front of the Lyric, it's all like, the wee trees, we used to play in there years ago, I'm talking only like 12 and all. It was all overgrown in there so we just we used to play in there you know and you were able to throw your bikes – there was no wee fence – so you just threw your bikes and played in there. And we were up playing, I can't remember what day it was, and we found these blue like big bins, a whole pile, somebody had dumped them. And we were all thinking like: 'what we going to do with these?' So, we made rafts out of them! We tied them all – there was about seven of them or something – but we put four of them together and tied them all together and got wood. We used to try and find wood up there or else would have come home and looked out for wood and put on our bikes and then ride back the next day. We made wee rafts and we used to race each other up and down the Lagan you know! Up just up a wee bit from the Stranmillis weir – we always stayed away from the weir, the weir is dangerous enough now. We didn't even have oars, just bits of wood and we'd pile the bikes and all on and just have wee races and all up and down there. You'd no money for food or anything – I'm not saying we were poor but you know, we'd not stop for lunch because if anybody got hungry

they jumped on the bank and went home, you know, but as long as we were home for 5:00 that was dead on."

'We used to go swimming in the Lagan, and that water was stinking but none of us ever caught anything...'

"If you go down Galwally past the lovely houses right to the very bottom there's like a hill, still there too. Now I haven't been there in a couple of years myself but it's still there, and that hill went down and there was like a wee stream that ran into the Lagan. I don't know what it was called, but we always used to just call it the 'Gudgie Stream'. It was always called the Gudgie Stream and we used to make ramps and ride the bikes and jump over it and so on... but as we were getting more confident, we used to go swimming in there, used to swim in the Lagan you know! One done it and then the rest went: 'well, if he can do it then I'm going to have a go', and swam across. And that water was stinking there but none of us ever caught anything. We used to just play up there for long years and years since I can remember."

"In them days now there was always the police pulling people out of the Lagan like and you knew when you'd seen the police, whenever anybody'd seen the police parked down by that bridge when you go to the Lyric, you knew there was something... you know? And then the divers and all used to come and we used to just pile down."

'In them days the police were always pulling people out of the Lagan'

"They used to jump off the The Bridge at the Ormeau Road end... a lot of them went off there. One or two off the Governor's Bridge ... there was a lot of people..."

"We gradually moved up to Belvoir, that's where we used to swim like with our clothes on! I used to ride home soaking you know? haha... it was good like... it was good fun there. And then they cleaned the Lagan out, spent a couple years cleaning, dredging it, and it was nice, it was nice fishing. It's good to see you know because it's nice to have it."

"After things started getting bad, my father just went right, you're away, off you go, you're for the army. And I cursed it like, I cursed him, really cursed him... But now that I look back now – my father's passed away now –

but I look back and think that is the best thing my dad ever did.”

‘Three of my children are named after rivers...

“Because my father-in-law was a fisherman, I used to drive him around all over the place and there’s a main river there in Rathmullen and it’s called the Lennon, but they pronounce the ‘Lennin’. I liked the name of it and I was thinking to myself you know if I ever have a boy, that would be a great name. And luckily enough, my wife was blessed, and Lennin came along. Then when my daughter came along, I didn’t know what to call her but we were up in Donegal visiting people and we just happened to be driving and there was a radio station called the Owenea and my wife said ‘oh, that’s the name of the river up here and it’s a famous salmon river’. I thought that’s a lovely name and if ever we have a daughter... right? And next thing Owenea came along! And see with Reelin? That’s a river not far from there, it’s a bit smaller than the one here. That’s the three of them named after rivers.

II.

“That’s right, the mouth of the Farset, Béal Feirste and it’s mostly culverted. Culverts aren’t great for rivers.”

“I started off working in chemistry doing chemical analysis on water and then I moved into the biology and really studying using the invertebrates that live in the river, and also the plants, to assess the water quality.”

‘Culverts aren’t great for rivers

“There are about 85 different aquatic families that you’d find in the rivers depending on what river and where and they really tell you the water quality. There’s some things like stoneflies and mayflies that are very sensitive to pollution. If you find them, and in good abundance, you know you’ve got good water quality. They’re really like the in-situ monitors on what’s happening in the river because... well, somebody described it as: ‘chemical analysis is like a photograph but biology is the video’. So they tell you what is happening with the water quality; the invertebrates are such a good indicator and readily available.

“You don’t need any fantastic machinery or anything. In 5 to 10 minutes or so you could say, well, this river

is good and it has been good or, if you go to the next bridge downstream and you see a very different community, you think well something could have happened here...”

“What you did – you had a sort of robust pond net and you’d get into the river and did what you call a three-minute-kick where you’d kick up the bed of the river, hold your net downstream behind your kicking foot, and you’re trying to get the invertebrates dislodged to go into the net, you know? We would go along three times a year, do our three minute kick and we’d take the sample back and do full analysis in the laboratory.”

‘We only did the Belfast streams in the winter time... generally they weren’t wonderful!

“We only did the Belfast streams in the winter time – often it was very cold – because they’re not major rivers and largely inaccessible, so one sample a year was sufficient for classifying those and generally they weren’t wonderful!”

‘Caddisflies are amazing little creatures. They’re like little architects

“Caddisflies are amazing little creatures. They build little stone and wee protective cases around themselves out of fine wee bits of stone and sand and sometimes vegetation – amazing! They’re like little architects. They have different styles of cases and some would have like square-shaped, some would use very fine sand, some would curve in a certain way, some would have the side of their case lined; just different designs of case if you know what I mean? Amazing... I often thought I’ve never seen a half-built case and I’ve never seen any classes going on in the river on how to build them. They innately build these things... like so many things in nature... it’s fascinating...”

“If you get too much runoff from, say, a land that had a lot of slurry or fertilizer put onto it and it rains, it goes into the river and fertilizer is designed to make things grow so it’ll also make things grow in the river. And if you get too much growth in a river it would reduce the oxygen level. I mean a river can get choked with things, lakes too.”

“Himalayan Balsam, we would have Japanese Knotweed and alien species were a thing that we would have

noted and quantified as much as we could even though they were on the banks of the river. We would have noted also protected species as well and made notes, but the alien species is something we looked for, and not just the plants. Even more importantly, in terms of our invertebrate samples, if you get alien species that come in they can change the invertebrate community artificially. I mean, for example, zebra mussels in the lakes... yes, so alien species would also be part of our monitoring programme”

‘Whenever I go over a bridge my head immediately turns around to look at the water

“I have a disease that means whenever I go over a bridge my head immediately turns around to look at the water in the river – it’s still inbuilt! I do miss it... I miss friends and colleagues a great team of people that I worked with and learned so much and I was always learning with it. On the plus side I could still put on a pair of wellies and get into a river and have a look myself anytime.”

“I’m in the Tyrone area and there’s a small stream here, the Black Water, and that would have been my nearest river. Where I grew up, my father was always interested in fish and rivers and he always said study biology. When I was studying in University in the 70s people were asking me what I wanted to do and I would say I don’t know, but I would like to do something with the environment maybe to do with rivers or water and I was lucky enough to end up in that field. You were always learning with it... always learning with it, you know?”

III

‘I could never stay away from the river, because like it kind of draws you to it... I didn’t have a garden or anything...

“As I was growing up and I went to the school, me and my friend, we used to walk home like along the river. I could never stay away from it, because like it kind of draws you to it, you know? Because I didn’t have a garden or anything so I was always playing either in the river or in Dixon Park. When you’re a kid you’re just drawn to the water and I remember I heard a story about just down there, in the ‘The Hollow’, there was a big

concrete run in the middle of it and it used to be always filthy. That’s the other memory I had. It was like an open sewer at the time, it was all slime; it wasn’t like it is now. I remember hearing a story that some kids had drowned in that part because that’s part of the Old Mill. I think it had been really treacherous and deep at one stage and it still was actually, but it’s not like that now I don’t think it’s as deep there as what it used to be.”

‘People would have pushed cars off the big slope into the river

“The Sunblest Bakery is where the big lorries used to park along there. Sometimes people would have pushed cars off the big slope into the river and then all the kids would sort of – we were feral you know!? Like it’s not like kids now... you got out of the house and you went and you played all day and you were doing really dangerous things and making really dangerous decisions whenever you were very, very young. There would have been loads of... you know... one kid did it then everybody would be daring everybody else. And you would jump on this car in the middle of this deep river! But.... that’s just what you did.”

“There was another bridge that went across – there’s houses there now – and people used to call it the plots and it was like a big concrete bridge and there were allotments there. My friend’s dad had a lot of allotments there and I remember going with her (it was her Granddad) to the allotment and he gave us flowers and I thought that he was amazing, you know? He was growing his own food he was growing flowers and he gave us flowers... I just couldn’t believe it.”

‘I always have this fear of those things... I think it came from the day that we were at the sewers and got stuck

“I know that in around the back of that were big sewage pipes. I have a very early memory of being there with my brother and he probably shouldn’t have taken me there. It was quite deep and we were crossing the river and trying to get across to them by standing on things and like really he shouldn’t have been there but he certainly should not have had me there but you know he probably couldn’t get rid of me. I always have this fear of those things and I think it came from the day that we were at the sewers and getting stuck. It was so dirty; it was

absolutely filthy. Whenever I was a kid and you would see rivers on holiday or on TV and you would think why can't why can't our rivers be like that?

"I have a friend who lives around there and she was she was moving to Larne. We went out for a meal and afterwards I walked her home and we went down there and that's the first time I think I've been down at 'The Hollow', as they call it now, since primary school and the change and the fact that the water was clean. She said that she sees kingfishers now and all this amazing wildlife and birds that, you know, they weren't there whenever I was a kid. It was it was pretty grim..."

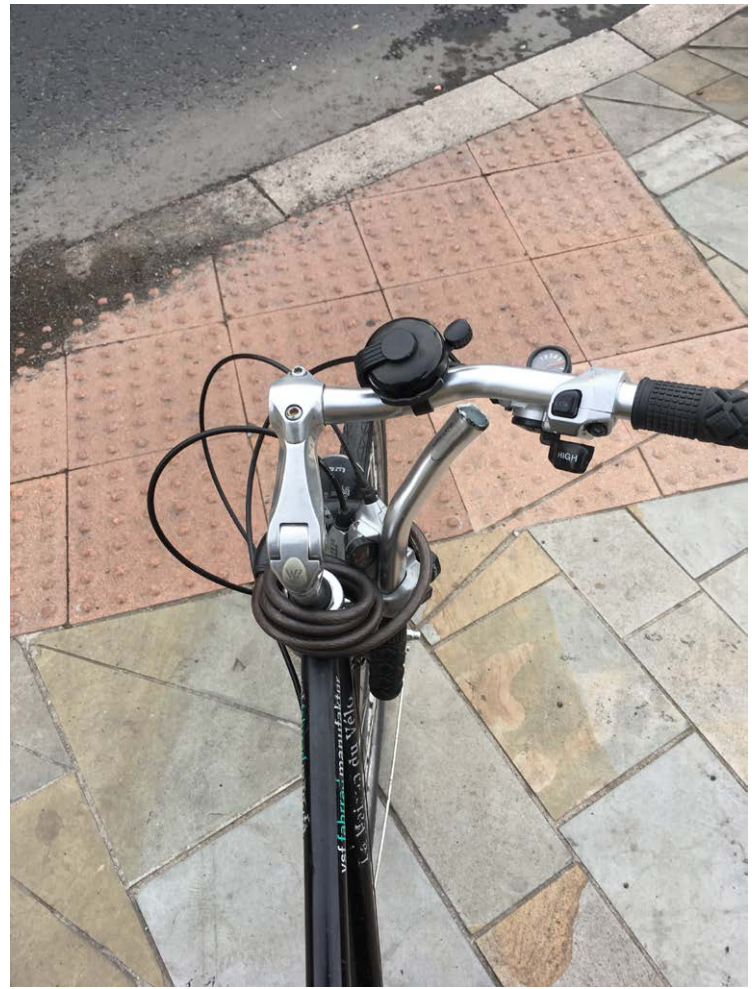
Streams of Consciousness

I. Lichen and Lagan-larking

Last Monday, I cycled down the Lagan Towpath in search of lichen. I'd seen it the previous weekend (why didn't I just get it then!?) and knew it was what I needed to complete a piece that had been gestating for close to a year now. As I remembered, there was lots of lichen to be found near the river, about halfway between the weir at Stranmillis and the Lockkeeper's Cottage. But it seems I remembered wrong...

As I cycled further and further than I'd intended, failing to spot the lichen I was after, I thought about the previous week where the flooding had been so bad that the Lagan River, and the Lagan Canal, which cuts a straight path through several meanders in the river, had become one in places, submerging low bridges and making some paths inaccessible. I also thought about a music video I made in 2019 that used footage of the river that I'd recorded using my phone in a gimbal while cycling along this same path. I later mirrored the video to create a shifting band of green foliage, grass and trees framed by water above and below.

I had done a lot of one-handed cycling around then on various ventures down alleyways and occasional rivers, left hand on left handlebar, right hand outstretched gripping phone camera and gimbal. I did it so much that on one occasion, while cycling into the city centre, my left handlebar actually snapped off! A 'catastrophic failing' for a handlebar as one bike expert acquaintance later commented. 'Shocking' I agreed, failing to mention the repetitive strain it had been under for months. However, the bike was still cyclable, and I fancied moments after the event, that I could press on, one-handing it into town and sorting it out later... but then I was assailed by a vision of the other handlebar suddenly snapping off too, and me speeding downhill from Lanyon Station with no brakes, no steering... I digress.



I spotted the lichen, but I was sure I'd seen more, so continued on until the Lockkeeper's Cottage before realising I'd passed the only place where I was going to find it easily. It was one of the rare occasions that I'd been there that the cottage was open, so I went in and had a quick tour of the two tiny rooms and a glimpse of the upper story where up to ten children once slept. Peter, the guide, was a font of knowledge about the Lagan and its wildlife and told a story about a seal that had visited further up the river as far as 'Eel Island'. I'd never heard of Eel Island and it got me thinking about places with local nomenclature that do not make it to the likes of Google Maps. A river biologist I'd spoken to recently had mentioned Wolfenden's Bridge, another place upriver, again the name of which isn't on digital maps. I recalled Van Morrison referring to the Loop River behind the street where he grew up as 'Beechie River'... Peter agreed to chat again and that I could record him on our next meeting as part of my *Riverruns* project.



On Hyndford Street
Van Morrison



nights

As the wireless played Radio Luxembourg

And the voices whispered across Beechie River

On my way back I stopped gather the pale turquoise lichen in a cotton bag and stowed it in my pannier, promising it that I would try to learn more about it, at least what it was called. As I was picking it someone had asked me what it was good for and I gave a stumbling explanation of what I was using it for. It was surprisingly dry in amongst the sodden tangled trees. Not wet, like moss, but almost brittle.



Towards the end of my return journey, I stopped off again near Albertbridge. A sudden enormous rumble could be heard as diggers ferried huge mounds of broken hard core and turfed it on the water's edge on

the opposite bank. They must be making a new path down that stretch of the river from the bridge, past 'Ferg's Warehouse' (try finding that on a map). On my side, the riverbank was a line of gravel and silt, scrubby plants, reed stubble and various bits of unidentified discarded shite. Thinking of Mark Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* (1999) I locked up and tried to do a bit of Lagan mudlarking. According to Belfast's River Manager, unlike the Thames, there is nowhere to do this type of activity safely on our principal river. However, undeterred, I had a go. I found four golf balls; two tennis balls; a scrap of bone; several broken shards of glazed ceramic; another more exciting bone that turned out to be the femur, tibia and fibula of a plastic Halloween skeleton; oyster shells, several flavours of vape; a broken Christmas tree bauble and a Thorinder 'herb' grinder (with magnetic kief tray). Not bad for half an hour. I told myself to wear gloves next time, returned to the studio to add the lichen to my completed artwork to take to Dublin the following day, and began thinking about what I should call it.



II. We Just Called It All Grass

It seems there is not a lot you are officially allowed to do on Annadale Embankment next to the River Lagan. Stickers on a noticeboard prohibit activities. They are hard to make out, the decals cracked and peeling like old Letraset, the whole piece of signage to which they still cling blackened by flames (it would seem lighting fires was not one of the prohibited activities). The schematic diagrams in red strikethrough circles seem to say: no drinking beer from dimple-glass tankards, no four-legged animals, no gifting of flowers, no queasy attempts at sexy dancing like John Cusack in *High Fidelity* when Jack Black takes to the stage – no hang on, no, it's golf, no golfing... although given the large quantity of golf balls I found on my last attempt at 'Lagan-larking', it seems this one at least is being ignored.



Further along, I discover that you are allowed, within certain strict parameters, to fish. A riverside notice identifies this section of the river as a 'coarse fishery'. Fish species you might expect to find here include roach, bream, sea trout, brown trout, mullet and salmon. Below, running along a dead-end pathway, are so-called 'fishing stands', concrete platforms filling gaps in the

railings and jutting out over the river's edge. Apparently, these are policed by 'water bailiffs' checking for rod licences, fishing permits and written permission from the Department of Communities. I have never seen anyone fishing here, despite the generous times the activity is permitted: 'Winter and Autumn – half and [sic] hour before sunrise and half an hour after sunset' and the rather more specific but equally broad Spring and Summer hours 'Between 06.00 and midnight'.



I am here because some friends, after hearing about my last mud-larking escapade on the Lagan, recommended an area of woodland near here which had previously been an old i.e., 19th century, dumping ground / brickworks, before nature reclaimed it, and where they had found antique bottles and bricks and other curios over the years. At least that is what I think they said; as I type it here now, it seems like wishful thinking on my part. Either way, I have not reached that spot yet, it is further upriver.

Walking along the embankment I see more fishing stands, then patches of wild nature in the no-man's land between the embankment railings and the river's edge. There are sycamore, oak, lime and beech trees; nettles, horsetail, brambles, cow parsley, goosegrass, vetch and rosebay willowherb. Growing up, apart the ubiquitous back garden daisy, buttercup and dandelion (and the stinging nettle) I never knew the names of any of these wildflowers. Almost everything I know now comes from one or two (they are that dense and informative) foraging walks with the wonderful Clare McQuillan who goes by the handle @feastingonweeds. The only plant ten-year-old me would probably have been able to identify in the wild, but never did see in the wild, would have been shamrock because that had a religious teaching attached to it that was drilled into us at school from a young age. My brother Dylan Brennan has a

poem in his collection *Let the Dead* that touches on, among other things, our wildflower ignorance entitled 'After an Ultrasound', in which, after running through a litany of flora from woundwort to yarrow to ribwort plantain, concludes with the lines: 'and to think of how / as children / we just called it all grass'.



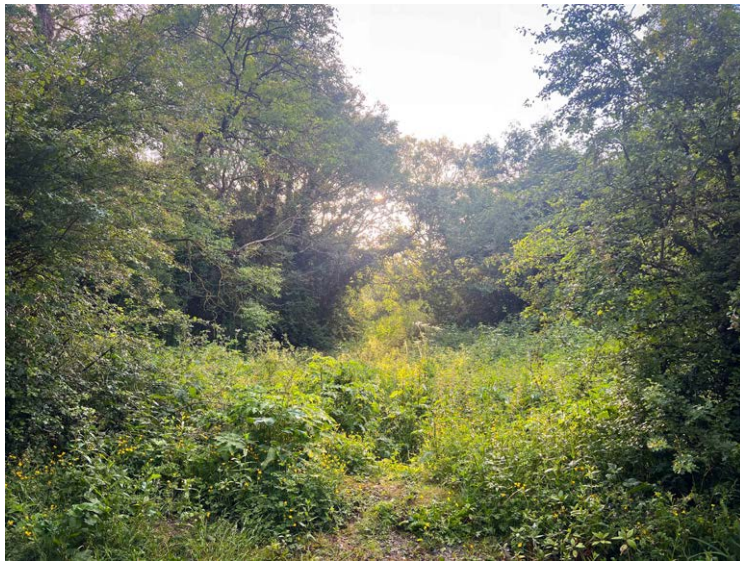
More plants: groundsel, clover, herb-Robert (I need to reverse image search that last one) until, yes, there it is, towering over everything, the hideous giant hogweed, its bulbous egg-shaped head ready to hatch a foaming splurge of florets. My brother (another one) had a run in with some of these that he found growing in his back garden. Unaware that the giant hogweed juice spattering over his arms as he went at it with the electric hedge cutters was making his skin lose its innate ability to protect itself from direct sunlight, it wasn't long before he was erupting in blotches and blisters. He made it worse: trying to cool his arm down by letting it dangle from the rolled-down car window in the breeze (alas also in the sun) as he drove to the pharmacy. I have seen these creatures in this part of the embankment before as I tiptoed around them trying to find my way back to the path, like looming triffids ready to strike. Incidentally, apart from their scale, they have something else in common with triffids – they are both Russian escapees (sort of). In Wyndham's novel, *The Day of the Triffids*, a Soviet biological experiment is released accidentally into the wild, while our giant hogweed, native to the Caucasus region, was brought to Europe as an ornamental plant and garden curiosity before it escaped.

I leave the nauseating giant hogweed to lord it over its horsetail minions and head in the direction I was tipped off about. There is a dusty path, like powdered cement, directing me in specific directions. There is another Belfast City Council sign proclaiming this area

as 'Laganlands East' – it also looks like it has suffered fire damage. A laminated page glued underneath reads 'Lagan Lands Lost...', followed by three QR codes: one a link to a Facebook group of concerned residents living in and around Lagan Meadows; another to a change.org campaign about the recent felling of mature trees by the Department for Infrastructure and arguments and confusion over whether sufficient environmental assessments or consultations with Stranmillis residents had taken place¹; and one to a now defunct Twitter account called @Seven_of_nine. A quick trawl through the Internet Archive's 'Wayback Machine' shows the account's owner was active from 2021 and then suddenly gave up in 2023 – presumably jaded after shouting into the void for two years at TERFs, evangelical Christians, Jamie Bryson, and grammar pedants (these are just some of the tweets I uncovered – I also picked up a great love of trains and obviously, given the social media handle, Star Trek).



¹ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-60563338>



I leave the dusty path towards the place I think my friends mean. My dog is not sure about this sudden plunge into the undergrowth, his long hair is already caught on some thorny creeper, but I untangle him and we press on. I wander about for a while on a woodland track, catching that soapy IPA whiff of elderflower that has been toasted in the sun for half a day but, apart from the odd half-embedded Belfast brick, I don't find anything. There is too much lush growth – it's probably the wrong time of year with everything so intoxicatingly overgrown. The track leads back to the dusty path and I change direction. Breaks in the trees show some wonderfully wild vistas – I want to try to draw them, inspired by large-scale Santi Moix pencil and charcoal drawings of rock formations on Menorca I recently came across.



The path turns and reaches a fenced-off field and then abruptly turns left and leads to another fenced off dead-end blocking access to a lavish half-built housing estate named 'The Hamptons'. Although the name Hampton seems to pre-exist in this area, referring to a housing estate as The Hamptons, presumably after the Long Island holiday spot for wealthy New Yorkers (which I can only ever associate with George Costanza's long drive with Laura Palmer's mother²) seems a bit of a stretch. And if that were not aspirational enough, some of the vast £1.2 million dwellings of reclaimed brick seem to be designed from scratch to look like grand old residences which have had modern extensions put on.

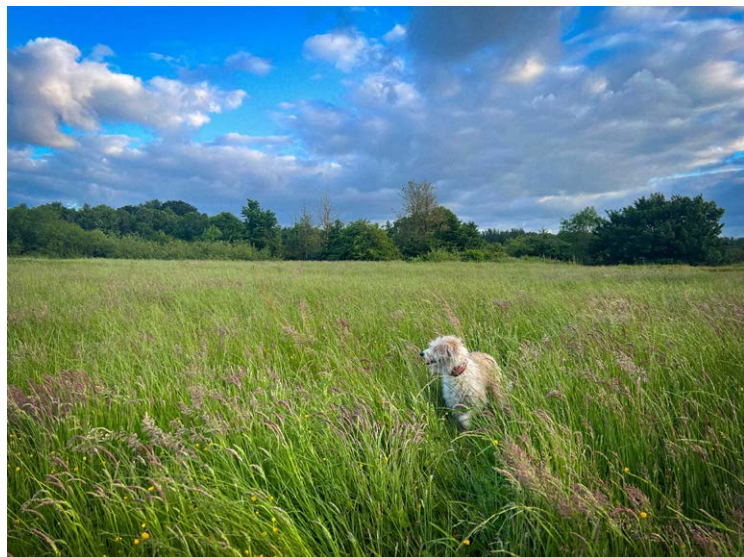
I backtrack and take another path which feels like it was made yesterday. There has obviously been a lot of development taking place in the area as part of 'Lagan Gateway Phase 2'. It seems that in this case, the concerned residents on the Facebook group were consulted and their concerns responded to in the Belfast City Council report.³ Two queries mention The Hamptons, but the council can only infer answers from the plans associated with this 'private scheme' because 'a private developer is currently undertaking [the] construction works'.

The light touch landscaping is pretty, but it also feels suspiciously like a theme park – fields closed-off by fresh fences: one full of buttercups and no ox-eye daisies, another full of ox-eye daisies and no buttercups. I am not really sure what is going on; I suspect things need a while to bed in and I veer off following another desire line through the long grass. It leads back to that fenced-off field.

² See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2NQGzUJqjU>

³ See: <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/Documents/Consultation-Report-Lagan-Gateway-Phase-2>

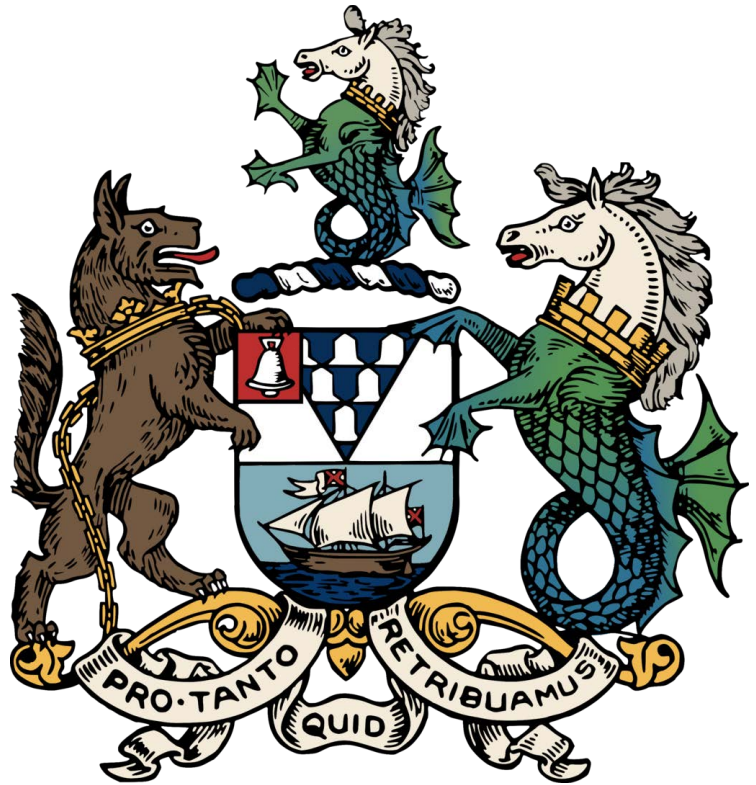
Thinking about the decapitated trees, the housing developments seeping towards the river's banks, and the destruction of habitat,⁴ makes me feel powerless. I am glad there are groups out there ready to protest and make their voices heard, and I know that the eventual planned path from here to Belvoir Forest will most likely be a wonderful resource. However, my thoughts drift towards a more general sense of environmental destruction and species collapse that shows no sign of slowing. And it is not as though this tiny area in a corner of a tiny city in a corner of Europe means much in the grand scheme of things when, for example, concurrently in Belfast, there is a screening of Richard Mosse's film documenting illegal mining, logging and burning in the Amazon over a ten-year period. And also, how should trees rank in one's list of concerns when a genocide⁵ is taking place in the Middle East. But to be honest, I don't feel all of this while looking at the fenced-off meadow; that comes later. For now, I want to see my dog doing his funny loping jump that he saves for long grass. I follow the desire line around the galvanised fence mesh and let him off the lead. It is not long before I lose sight of his tail amongst the nodding meadow soft grass, but he is old enough now to know to come back when I call him. Unless he spots a squirrel... then I'm really fucked.



III. Not Finding the Farset

I told someone recently that I was writing about the rivers of Belfast and they responded with a question – ‘you mean the Lagan?’ Maybe it was to be expected; they, like me, are a blow-in, and were not aware of the likes of the Blackstaff, the Colin, the Connswater, Ligoniel, Milewater or the Forth (in loyalist areas) which

becomes the Clowney (in nationalist areas), or the Farset. I mean why would they? And why do I for that matter? I'll park that question for the moment. Maybe when I finish this series of texts, I'll have a better idea...



The Farset is, of course, the river that gives Belfast its name; ‘Belfast’ being an anglicisation of the Irish Béal Feirste. Originally, the Farset was more important than the Lagan which was, at that time, long before the Long Bridge, and longer before the Lagan Weir, still tidal and had a habit of silting up. Incidentally, the Lagan still needs to be dredged every 10 or 15 years – in 2020, for example, 55,000 m³ of silt was removed and dumped somewhere in the Irish sea, and 250 tonnes of ‘manmade rubbish including shopping trolleys, traffic cones and bikes’ was taken to ‘disposal sites’. Bet you didn't know that.

I'll forever link the Farset with the recently-departed and much-missed poet Ciaran Carson. Gazing into it as a child, into the river's ‘dark exhausted water’ somewhere at the bottom of Waterville St, Carson saw ‘a bottomless bucket. The undercarriage of a pram. A rusted spring mattress’. Béal Feirste he tells us, in a short prose piece entitled ‘Farset’ (in his collection *Belfast Confetti*) means the mouth of the (river) Farset. But Carson goes much further. *Feirste* comes from *fearsad*, a sandbank. However, the word can also refer to ‘a shaft; a spindle; the ulna of the arm; a club; the

⁴ See: <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/residents-raise-concerns-proposed-luxury-23094414>

⁵ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68667556>; and <https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide>; and <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide>

spindle of an axle [...] a deep narrow channel on the strand at low tide; a pit or pool of water; a verse, a poem', a wallet, an axis, etc., etc. He teases out the word's multiple meanings. He renatures Farset, reducing it to a semantic puddle. He also quotes Ward, Lock & Co.'s Guide to Northern Ireland which pokes fun at Belfast's civic coat of arms, specifically its bell – a ship's bell we are told – that is a 'feeble pun' on the 'Bel-' in Belfast. I'm relieved the crest's designer did not attempt to apply the same graphic punning with the second syllable – adding perhaps cartoon speed lines on either side of the bell to indicate rapid tolling.

The thing about the Farset today is that it is largely invisible, its original course through the city centre having long been culverted, even in Carson's early years. Covered over, in fact, over the course of the 18th century, its course still runs under High Street, accounting for the unusual width of that street and its slight curve, before unceremoniously plopping into the Lagan via an unmarked arched opening in the quay walls.

One evening, I find I have a small window where I can go exploring the Farset and set off with a blog post I find online entitled 'Finding the Farset' by way of a guide. It is not before several hours of walking, without so much as a glimpse of running water, that I realise I've done insufficient research. Perhaps it would have been worth even reading the first line of the post, I later reflect, which states "Finding the Farset' isn't really a fair title as the majority of the river is underground'. Nostalgia had gripped me in the form of memories of wandering around Europe in the late 90s with *Lonely Planet* guides to various countries (they always had the best self-guided walks) that led me to things like a John Lennon wall in Prague, a Frank Zappa monument in Vilnius, and Jeanneke, the statue of a peeing girl in Brussels. It'll be fine, I think. However, this is not one of those guided walks – it assumes familiarity with lesser-frequented parts of the city, it jumps from one stage to the next without directions, and is filled with digressions on buildings of interest (which I admittedly enjoy).

I drive – unquestioningly – to a carpark near Governors Bridge, almost 10km from where I've heard the source of the Farset is located (on Squire's Hill). I don't read the line in the text I've chosen to follow, which states: 'Looking for the Farset one wouldn't really start at Governors Bridge, but it has a car park and the Lagan is the final destination of the Farset.' At this point, if I'd

bothered to read the article properly, alarm bells might have started to toll rapidly.

I park near the bridge and begin walking up Stranmillis Road. The walk takes in Riddell Hall, the Ulster Museum and Botanic Gardens, passing an ancient graveyard that I've always meant to visit. I try to remember the name of it before I get there, without resorting to my phone, and come up with 'Bishop's Finger'. It's called 'Friars Bush'... I stop for a moment to take in the bizarre mish-mash of styles and periods that is Elmwood Hall, its bell tower like some ornate chess piece. I pass some freshly-painted bollards that feature another element from that coat of arms – a prancing seahorse, or perhaps more correctly, in the arcane language of heraldry, a 'hippocampus', a chimera with the upper body of a horse and the lower body of a fish.

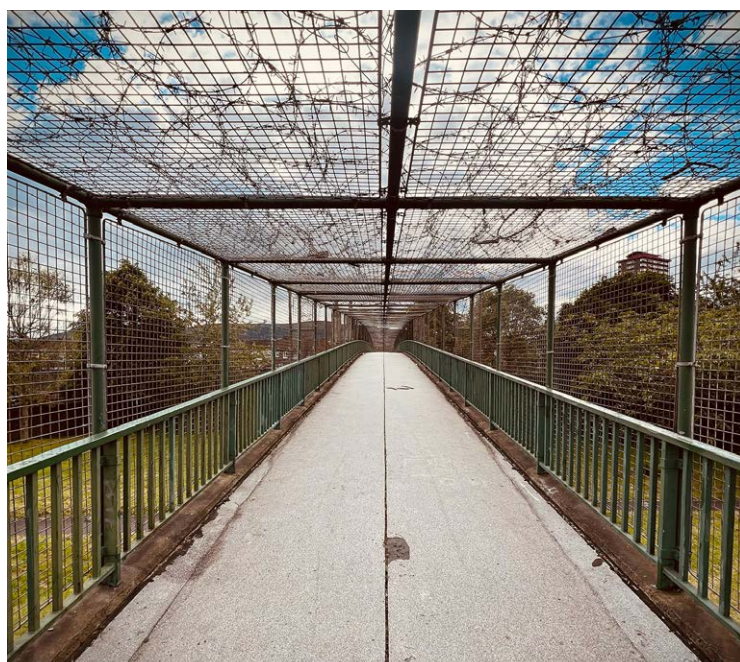


Further on, I pass Louise Walsh's 'Monument to the Unknown Woman Worker' which stands just outside the grandiosely-titled 'Great Northern Mall', the entrance to the Europa Bus Station. It's a subtly provocative and humorous sculpture depicting two sturdy women (initially commissioned to acknowledge nearby Amelia Street's history as a red-light district) with symbols of domestic work embedded on its surfaces. Items such as colanders, scouring brushes, pacifiers, a shopping basket, clothes pegs, balls of wool, combs, a telephone, as well as newspaper clippings, all form part of the sculpture. The work had a fraught history, involving interventions from several members of the Paisley family, and was almost never completed. I recently recorded an interview with Louise for a video piece I was making on Carlisle Memorial Church. She worked

there during the winter of 1987 despite its troubled location, pigeons repeatedly crapping on her drawings, and the penetrating cold. But that's another story.

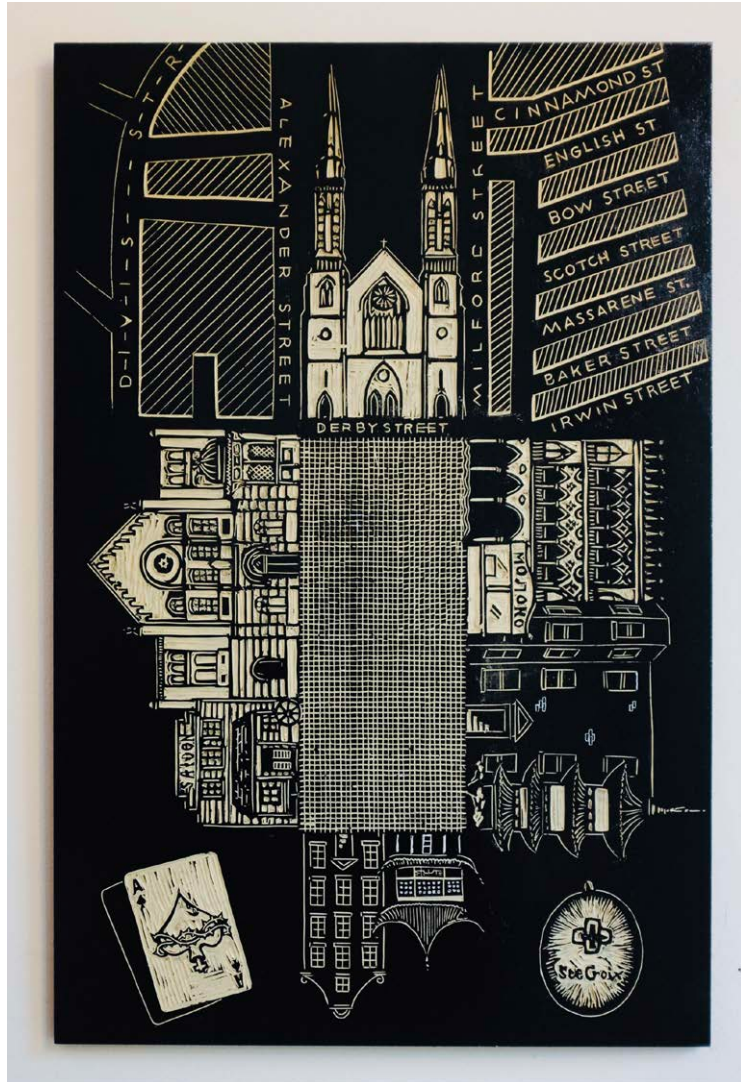


Skirting around the rear of the Grand Opera House, I reach the back of the Belfast Academical Institution, or 'Inst' as it is known locally, to Christchurch (now a library and IT centre). Through the railings I see another seahorse. This one is metallic, patchwork and blind, and really is a seahorse, rather than a sea horse. A small plaque at the base probably offers some words of explanation for the presence of a seahorse sculpture but it is facing away from me and I cannot read it. A former Inst graduate gets in touch to tell me about a building known on campus as the RAF Hut which was built directly over the Farset, the construction costs of which escalated significantly due to the complications of the water course under the site. In a pub a few days later, a different former student tells me that the seahorse sculpture is there because the aquatic creature is one of the few examples where the male gets pregnant and gives birth. After briefly pondering the symbolism of this in an all-boys' school I decide he has dredged up a seahorse fact and applied it to the milky-eyed sculpture, rather than providing me with its actual *raison d'être*. My blogger guide offers some tenuous words of, I decide, consolation: 'this Seahorse is located to the rear of Christchurch within Inst and starts to show that we are seeing the links with the maritime history based around the Farset'. Ding-a-ling.



I press on, to stage 18 of the walk, 'Westlink to Falls', over a caged-in bridge I recognise from a scene in locally-filmed police series *Blue Lights*. Reaching the other side, I have a conversation about lurchers with a guy on a bike in a housing estate beside Divis Tower. I often imagine myself looking very suspicious on these investigative river walks, so the dog is a good prop – he also seems to be enjoying himself immensely. I walk around St Peter's Cathedral (stage 19) – another strong Carson axis. I recall an extended flight of fancy,

in his uncategorisable work *The Star Factory*, where he envisages a myriad of buildings (a Laredo saloon, Glasgow tenement, Venetian palazzo, Amsterdam tall house, Warsaw synagogue, Kyoto temple, etc.) surrounding a fantastical piazza in front of the twin-spired building. It inspired a piece of my own.



Stage 20 discusses Divis Tower Block. Stage 21, however, Townsend Street, finishes me off. The entry for this section is copied primarily from an article in the Belfast Telegraph – an evocative piece from an uncredited author that follows the river from its source to John Kindness’s sculpture ‘the Big Fish’ on the banks of the Lagan. I feel, after 90 or so minutes of continuous walking, that I’m about to be treated to a view of the Farset. However, the piece directs me to a spot, which is not part of the guided route, ‘just above the Horseshoe Bend, where the Crumlin Road turns into Ballyutoag Road’, a good 40-minute walk from here towards the Belfast Hills. I accept that I’m not going to see the Farset today, and abandon the guide and head into the city down North Street, Bridge Street and High Street, brooding over how long it is going to take me to walk back to the car.

I’m feeling pissed off with myself now and the cityscape indulges me, moulding itself to my mood. I’m now in the Laganside area, a place with great potential but one I find intensely irritating – red-and-white warning signs have been attached seemingly everywhere: no drinking, no cycling on ramp, no climbing, etc. And then there is the street furniture: benches with periodic metal spurs on which no one ever sits, because they’re not actually seats but rather hostile street furniture designed to halt cyclists, skateboarders and homeless people. The Wikipedia entry for hostile architecture explains the term with unabashed directness – I can almost imagine the words coming out of the likes of Jacob Rees Mogg’s ventriloquist doll mouth: ‘Hostile architecture[a] is an urban-design strategy that uses elements of the built environment to purposefully guide behaviour. *It often targets people who use or rely on public space more than others, such as youth, poor people, and homeless people*, by restricting the physical behaviours they can engage in.’ Emphasis my own.

The area is windswept and abandoned. A man cycles past me very slowly, looking like an escapee from a Béla Tarr film. He looks miserable, draped over the bike and moving as if through tar itself. Then I glimpse a reflection of myself – a potato man on stick legs scowling at inanimate objects – and realise I might as well be in the same Béla Tarr nightmare. I pass the Waterfront, the ‘iconic’ building by the water which was then obscured inexplicably by an extension, removing it from the water’s front; an extension in which I have no idea what happens, nothing I suspect. Two dried up oblong patches of sandy earth narrow the available space for cyclists, possibly planted at one stage, now barren – I bet they looked great in the architectural maquette.



I pass the burned remains of a barge that burst into flames at 3 o'clock in the morning in early April. Then Waterfront Plaza – a massive showy, white and black, steel and glass pile on the river's edge – 135,000 ft2 of ex-PWC office space, once offered to my studio group as a possible meantime building some 18 months ago, and still lying empty. Then there's Plastik – a former nightclub which also burst into flames. It has a wonderful location, right on the river, but has been closed for almost ten years. Get your shit together Belfast, I think.



Lesser Black-Backed Gull [*Larus fuscus*]

This handsome gull is a common sight throughout the summer in Belfast City Centre and along the Lagan. It can usually be seen from early spring through to the end of October, when it flies off to winter on the coast of West Africa. It nests throughout the city, mostly on flat roofs and here on McConnell's Weir. A natural scavenger, it thrives on thrown away food from late night takeaways and its raucous call is now a familiar sound in the city.

Another dog conversation – sometimes it's simpler to answer 'yes, he is an Irish wolfhound' instead of entering into a discussion on lurchers, Bedlingtons, and Irish Wheatens, but whenever I do that, I feel guilty. I do the former, and I feel guilty. I cut across the Albert Bridge to the embankment on the other side, thankful that while the starling murmuration has not yet returned to its full glory after the adjustment of new brighter LED lights under the bridge, it at least has not gone for good. Further along, an information post explains some of the local flora and fauna in the area. I notice that someone really has it in for the 'Lesser Black-Backed Gull' – the image of the 'handsome gull' in flight has been repeatedly struck with a blunt object, cracking the surface to expose the now rusted metal beneath. And then I have a flashback to when I cycled past this very spot some years previously, pedalling at full pelt, racing to collect children from school. I was running late and I

assumed the pigeon would move – I mean they usually do, right? This one didn't. I remember shouting 'no! no!' after the impact, and chanced a glance back over my shoulder to see what looked like the contents of a pillow scattered across the footpath. Then an vision I think David Lynch would be proud of – the macabre image of a single white feather spinning like a Spokey Dokey round and round, stuck to my front wheel. 'We had a deal'⁶ my friend shouted at me when I explained to her what had happened. I hadn't seen the Seinfeld episode she was quoting from.

Time to call it a day I reckon and I trek back to Governor's Bridge, the place where 'one wouldn't really start [if] looking for the Farset'.⁷

To be continued...

IV. Finding the Farset – Part I

I am standing at the base of a six-metre-tall piece of public art in the middle of a field overlooking Belfast. What looks like a large wireframe model of a teardrop is perched, or rather, rooted to, a thick steel pole – visually too thick a support for the more delicate lines of metal tracery above. From certain angles it looks like a comet about to vaporise Belfast. A nearby information board (inexplicably in the shape of a bottle opener) informs me that the work is called 'Origin' and 'signifies the origin of the water which forms the River Farset, which springs from the hills directly behind the sculpture and runs all the way into the River Lagan where the 'Big Fish' is located.' It claims that the raindrop 'seems to hover [no comment] six metres above the ground' and 'nestled inside the raindrop, is a fin of Narima glass, giving an ethereal quality and animating the external structure with elements of spectral colour, movement, texture, reflection and refraction which continuously shifts with the changing light and creates an arc of energy reflected back to the viewer'. Apparently four square metres of 'toughened Narima glass' were used in the construction of the piece but only two small panels remain, one of which is shattered. Not toughened enough apparently.

⁶ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPCZtrac-Ss&t=1s>

⁷ I have some fun with the blog post I used as a guide for this Farset walk, mostly poking fun at myself for not reading its premise properly before setting out. It is actually a fascinating walk that tracks (after a while!) above ground, the path of the river below ground and led me into one or two pockets of the city I had never been in, despite living here for 12 years. A blow-in.

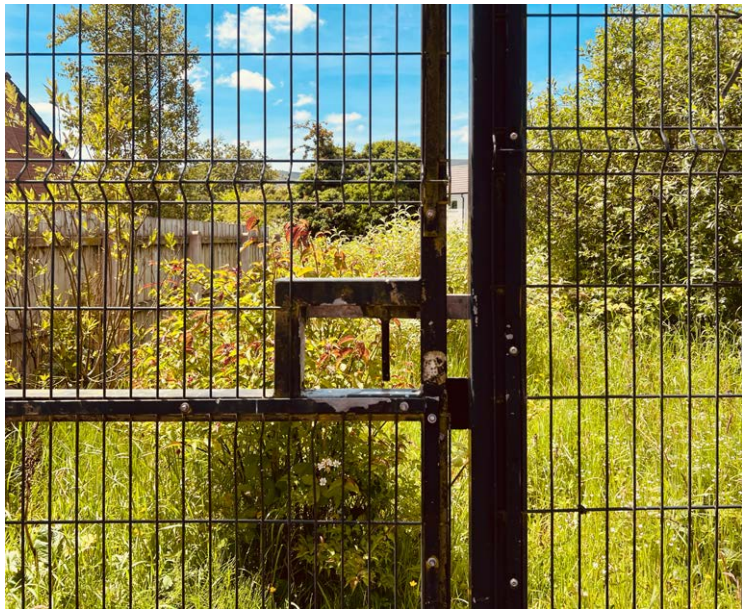


I am here because after an ill-prepared first attempt at finding the Farset, the river to which Belfast owes its name (that saw me not finding the Farset at all) I've decided to give it another go. This time I devote an entire day – it turns out to be the hottest day of the year so far – and I do research, and I bring a car. Well, research is a rather grand title – I have two web pages open on my phone to guide me. One is a 2013 article in the Belfast Telegraph called *The lost river that gave Belfast its name* – an evocative, charming and well-researched piece by one Linda Stewart, who seems now to write for a more arcane publication titled *The Microbiologist*. The second is a blog post called *Mapping Belfast's Hidden River Farset* in which an unnamed blogger from Bradford who, like me, also begins at the *Origin* sculpture – which she describes as 'not very well received'. She is not doing it justice though – it in fact won first prize in *The Spectator's* award for bad public art in 2017. The publication even adds another five metres to the piece in the opening line of an article regarding the award: 'Imagine climbing the hills that surround Belfast and stumbling upon this 11-metre-high steel bollock'. A bit harsh?



The text of the blog post is quite short, the main attraction of this particular piece being a custom Google map in which the author has pinned markers at all points of potential significance over the Farset's course. I get the impression that she used the Bel Tel article as a guide, and then examined Google Maps' aerial photo view to look for places that fitted the description, and then proceeded to add waypoints with titles like: 'Wet area', 'Looks like it could be a watercourse' etc., followed by some rather more obscure pins entitled: 'What are they looking at?' and 'Suggestive hedgerow'. However, it is a map and it is, I believe, a very accurate one because this time – spoiler alert – I do find the Farset.

Back to Linda: 'According to the Belfast Hills Partnership, the source of the Farset is to be found just above the Horseshoe Bend, where the Crumlin Road turns into Ballyutoag Road.' After several drive-bys, I find a place to park near the Horseshoe Bend. It is an aptly named bend near Squire's Hill, an area historically populated with limestone quarries, some of which still remain. I hop into the field where supposedly the Farset source is situated and begin searching, however, as I have never located a river source before, I am not sure what I am looking out for. The grass is high, up to my knees. Moving towards the centre of the field, it is soon up to my elbows and I start stumbling as the ground underfoot becomes more uneven and thicker with vegetation. The article describes the river 'rising from a bed of watercress and nettles in a field yellow with ragwort and flickering with white butterflies [and] horses [...] dipping their noses deep into the watercress bed as they search for a refreshing drink of water'. The only animal I come across is a large ginger cat which I almost step on – I don't know who gets a bigger fright. I go deeper into the field – the green stuff is now shoulder high – but I do not see any horses or butterflies or sources. I make for an area of darker green, thick with tall rushes and suddenly my feet feel wet in the now-squelchy ground. This is good enough for me. Hello source of the Farset – finally!



It is not obvious where the source goes from here so I return to the article. I find the next part tricky and I lose Linda as she plunges beneath the Ballyutoag Road and through 'a tree-cloaked gully' and then 'into a litter-strewn grille beneath the Crumlin Road and down into Ballysillan' – hope you're OK Linda... The next section of the Farset above ground is in a residential area encompassed by Ballysillan Park and Benview Park but it is inaccessible; that is to say, it is uncovered and flowing among greenery and tall trees but at the backs of residential gardens. Looking longingly at it via the aerial photo custom map on my phone, I see that it is quite a sizeable area. There seem to be a couple of potential access points i.e., gaps in the rows of semi-detached houses, but the Dept for Infrastructure or Belfast City Council or the Rivers Agency or some other meddler in my affairs has got there before me, erecting tall fences. I enter the grounds of the Ballysillan Gospel Hall, past a giant broken TV with a note for the binmen saying 'this is not ours, someone left it here' and peep over the back wall... but I can't see much. I feel even more exposed creeping around housing estates today; everyone is out in the fine weather. This time I do not even have the dog with me to take the weirdo edge off, so, after thinking better of asking one of the neighbours if they have access via their back garden to this Farset garden of Eden, I head down the hill to where, apparently, the river rushes 'deep into a tunnel beneath the Happy Choice Chinese takeaway'. I like the idea of it also rushing under the local chipper opposite. It is called 'Cod Almighty'.

In Ballysillan Park I hear the Farset for the first time, and then shortly afterwards I finally see it, running along the backs of the gardens on Oldpark Avenue. It then

emerges into the park proper and I can touch it too. It is still very much a stream at this point, ducking and diving through concrete pipes and into areas marked with warning notices that read 'NO UNAUTHORISED ENTRY', 'DANGER Fast Flowing Water', 'DANGER Confined Space' and 'DANGER Deep Water'. One such area is protected by a chain link fence, topped with barbed wire, behind a galvanised steel fence topped with spikes. Bloody hell; the Farset might look like an ankle-deep, one-metre-wide stream but do not be fooled – it is apparently deadly. A final sealed-off area marks the point where the Farset disappears underground again. A brief section is visible near Alliance Gardens but again it is fenced off and protected by 'Hidden CCTV cameras' (and infrared lasers and hidden pits filled with poison-tipped bamboo spikes no doubt...)



'The next part of the route can be traced by the old mills that once relied heavily on the Farset's water' says our Linda. It is true: Brookfield Mill sits almost opposite Edenderry Lofts, also a former mill. Here the Farset runs in a dead straight line behind Tennent Street, a thoroughfare of houses originally built for mill workers. Ciaran Carson, whose name one must invoke when speaking about the Farset, writes about the river and the mills: 'Serendipitously, the Farset is an axis

between the Catholic Falls and the Protestant Shankill, as its power source was responsible for a string of mills in which both denominations were employed, with separate entrances for Prods and Taigs from North and South of the divide, notwithstanding the same terrible conditions, producing linen which they could never afford to buy. Instead, the women who wrought in the mills made underwear for their children out of flour-bags’.

I duck behind a washing line at the back of Tennent Street and into the undergrowth to find the river again – another short and uncovered section that flows as far as the next culvert on Sydney Street West. In these little pockets of wilderness, I sometimes feel like I’m entering the world of children; the patrin of lost footballs and tyre swings marking trails and entire play worlds invisible to the uninitiated. The river reflects a rippling light on the underside of the sycamore leaves that arch over the swishing gurgling watercourse. A small dog barks, snapping me out of my reverie. Time to move on...

To be continued...

V. (Not) Clowney-ing Around

So far, I’ve tended to walk the rivers alone, or with my dog friend Barney. But there have been exceptions. Once we walked, as a family, in the Knock River’s stretch through Orangefield Park during one of the lockdowns. It was a patch of the river that was difficult to access (and has since been meticulously fenced off) faced on either bank with sheer concrete walls. Neighbours watched us suspiciously from windows; some came to peer in and scowl. The kids seemed to enjoy it, splashing along in their wellies. I felt uneasy. I am not sure what my wife felt. She never asked if we could do it again if that says anything... A few weeks back on my search for the Clowney (a river with two names: it is the Forth towards its source on Divis Mountain overlooking Belfast) I made another exception; I invited my friend Joe along. I had to invite Joe – he is a wordsmith (and then some) of impeccable dress and musical taste, but more importantly he lives on Clowney Street under which the eponymous river flows. Not far from Joe, it makes a brief appearance before disappearing again under the motorway to join the Blackstaff on the opposite side of the manmade gorge cynically named the Westlink.



As with most of the rivers in the west and centre of the city i.e., on the older Co. Antrim side, rather than the Co. Down side (the Lagan River dividing the two) the Forth/Clowney, for much of its course, has been culverted over and is not visible. I meet Joe on Clowney Street and he is raring to go. ‘Let’s find this ____ river!’, he booms as we head out his front door on our quest. The plan, on this occasion, is to walk upstream, through a broadly nationalist part of the city, to where the Clowney (which derives from *cluaineach* i.e., ‘water-meadowy’ in Irish) becomes the Forth in loyalist west Belfast. We first need to backtrack, however, to where the Clowney meets the Westlink, attempting to follow a thin blue line on a 2014 Rivers Agency flood map towards the motorway. I say ‘attempt’ as the river of course is running through underground channels that only periodically pay heed to the routes of the streets overhead. Is there anything to indicate that the Clowney runs under Clowney Street I wonder as we walk downriver – we agree that the street seems markedly wider than Amcomri Street and Beechmount Parade that both run parallel to it. We look for further clues and find them in streets with watery names like Islandbawn and Fallswater. This could be wishful thinking but the ‘Falls Road Stream’, a tributary of the Clowney, also flows underground near here, and our river is sometimes known as the Clowney Water. Not to mention Clonard further up the Falls Road which Ciaran Carson explains in *The Star Factory* comes ‘from the Irish *cluain ard*, ‘high water-meadow’.

After finding ourselves trapped in cul-de-sacs, we opt to skirt around the front of Park Centre retail park. I have never been in here and later check out some online reviews. The shopping centre seems to have had its ups and downs, with a one-star review from

a local guide writing five years ago that reads: 'Like a scene from one of those zombie movies from the 80s. Almost entirely deserted apart from a few who just keep coming here because they don't know what else to do'. Recent reviews are more favourable, the general feeling being the centre has 'its mojo back' with one five-star review calling it the 'Holy Grail of a store, well laid out, staff affable'. There is also much praise for the toilets. Joe tells me his dad once made him set up a stall here selling surplus medical equipment. It sounds like a pained affair so I decide not to press him on the subject for now.

In a forgotten corner of the carpark, beyond the men offering MOT washes, I notice the familiar infrastructure of the culvert entrance – a steep incline with steps framed by galvanised steel railings, gangways and chains, all enclosed in 10-ft fencing. Despite the heavy security, we are delighted by this first glimpse of the Clowney, just before it runs into darkness under the motorway and is the Clowney no more. It is wider, more seductive and significant than we imagined, a small meander of nature surrounded on all sides by concrete and steel. We head around the corner to the now empty 'Broadway Towers' site to get a better view.



The Broadway Towers (christening areas in Belfast with the names of famous locations in the US is not new it would seem – see 'The Hamptons' or the attempt to re-brand the Cathedral Quarter as 'Tribeca') were originally built as homes for nurses working in the Royal Victoria Hospital. There is a charming RTÉ archive news report from 1966 on the then brand new towers, describing them as 'fully furnished with all modern conveniences' and looking like 'a luxury hotel' with furniture that appears 'quite expensive'. Another plus, according to one of the nurses interviewed, is that residents 'have the freedom to come and go as they please, which contrasts with life in a nurses' home where student nurses have to be in by 11 o'clock at night'. Give it a watch. The dilapidated towers have been lying empty now for almost ten years. According to an article in local news website Belfast Live, the owners, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, recently defended this with a statement: 'The Broadway Towers site continues to be operationally important for the Belfast Trust providing 327 much needed car parking spaces'... It is a weekday but the carpark is pretty much deserted. Maybe no one wants to park beside a derelict tower block? There are gaps in a concrete wall that afford us another glimpse of the river, a sliver of bucolic Clowney. Close by, we discover the truncated stump of a bronze sculpture which has been mercilessly sawn to pieces. It might have once depicted a tree – it looks like a heart says Joe. It does look like a heart, the crudely sawn-off branches reminiscent of diagrams in school biology books, with their empty vena-cavas, pulmonary veins and arteries; clean, colour-coded and sliced in cross section, and not a drop of blood in sight. Later I try to find out more about the sculpture but cannot find any information. I contact artist and academic Una Walker, who is vastly knowledgeable on sculpture in Ireland but she, at the time of writing, is totally baffled. Joe and I follow the wall of the carpark around and catch another few sightings of the river but cannot see where it disappears again. Time to head upriver.



Returning to Clowney Street, we work our way upstream, still using the flood map to trace the river's underground passage. We pass a community centre called the Blackie River in the Beechmount estate, before getting a bit lost. It is another clue. Some days later I end up trawling through 13 pages of a thread on a forum from 2009 with people reminiscing about playing in the river 'Flush' some 30, 40 and 50 years previously. Some contributors say that the Flush – yet another name for the Forth/Clowney – was known as the 'Blackie' when it reached Beechmount housing estate. Some claim it has been called the 'Cotty' since at least the 1980s. Several people reminisce about the Franklin Laundry that would dump water into the river, making it warm for paddling and accounting for the shifting colours of river on any given day. There is also much talk of meeting members of the opposite sex (and opposite side of the religious divide) for a 'lumber'. Something else catches my attention: references to weeds called 'Motherdies'. 'The kids all said if you picked them your mother dies, mad or what, we were scared to go near them' says 'justluvbeingme'. 'rose60' describes them as 'tiny wee flowers making up big white flat heads ... thick green stems ... grew quite large ... I would not touch one for love nor money'. I cannot help thinking that they are describing giant hogweed, a plant the sap of which is phototoxic i.e., it prevents the skin from being able to protect itself from sunlight, which leads to serious skin inflammation or even blindness. A folk tale fabricated to protect young children navigating the (literal) wastelands of youth. 'I can touch them now my poor old mum is gone' adds rose60.



Joe guides us out of Beechmount with the aid of Google maps and I figure out again where we are on my fuzzy paper map. Just as we think we are about to be treated to another view of the Forth-Clowney-

Flush-Blackie-Cotty, the flood map – which admittedly is a good 10 years old – lets us down. Ambling up the Forfar Road we decide that scaling the gates into a new Belfast Met campus will be more effort than it is worth, the river has obviously been culverted in the meantime. Further up, just beyond the bend in the Springfield Road, there is a new piece of public art: a tall, silver and featureless figure, with long legs and bendy arms, carrying a child on their shoulders. I start thinking about the Slender Man meme that caused moral panic in 2014. But I suspect that is just me – a mind ruined by the internet. There is an information plaque near the base in Irish, English and Ulster Scots, this is an interface area after all. Someone has already tried to scratch out the Irish language text. This place...

I spot a culvert. 'Over there, Joel'. 'How do you know?'. 'I just know', I say sagely (I am starting to show off now; now that I have someone to show off to). The culvert is inaccessible, but the river leads into it from an area that feels recently developed for the local community: tarmac paths, folksy wooden posts with wire fencing, with the more serious high mesh fencing beyond, and a definite river running alongside the tarmac path. We wade into the tall grass, horsetail, and ragwort for a better look: a swathe of that ubiquitous summer interloper Himalayan Balsam flanks a trickle of black water, slick with oily residue, red bricks worn river smooth, green and yellow shards of plastic sheeting poking out, and a traffic cone for good measure. All it needs now is a shopping trolley. It is a miserable affair and Joe is disappointed. I get the sense that the Clowney Street man is taking this personally and I get how he feels. The map shows a more significant river and I am finding it hard to believe this is it but... I guess this is it? We think we hear a more impressive sibilance up ahead, but it is just the wind stirring the sycamores. What an ignominious end to our river.



Decidedly deterred, we nonetheless head further along the path. Signifiers of this area as an interface begin to take physical form: there were gates at the entrance, and more gates towards the exit. There are opening and closing times, yes as with most city parks, but also like the gate on the peace wall we passed on the Springfield Road. In addition, more fencing runs to our right, parallel to the path, which Joe reckons marks the division between two West Belfast communities. Beyond, however, the landscape slopes downwards; there seems also to be a natural barrier – hang on, might this be the proper river? We obviously need to get down, but there does not seem to be any easy way of doing so from the park. We exit through the far end onto West Circular Road. It is July. Union Jacks are flying; we have definitely crossed an invisible border. There is a gap in a gate where tracks leading into a wasteland veer off in various directions back the way we came, but they are on the other side of the fence now, and the other side of the valley, in which there has to be the river.



One worn steep path leads us to the right and down and down, into the valley. We descend into the past, into entire childhoods. At the bottom I see a concrete block bracketed in tubular safety railings, like a viewing platform. Excitement builds. In another text in this series I questioned why anyone would walk for kilometres in search of a glimpse of a hidden river. I am starting to realise that this feeling is why. But what is this feeling?; this pit-of-the-stomach draw to places like this?



We stand on the platform looking down at a sizeable river five metres below; it is more than two metres across. How could we have thought that earlier choked gully was our Clowney!? There is a grille under our feet – the concrete block is hollow it would seem. We clamber down towards the river bank, gripping some unchecked Japanese Knotweed for balance, and stand on the riverbank. Joe is bewitched by the place. Me too. I have that feeling I always get in places like this i.e., that they are not long for this world, that the next time I try to come here I may have trouble getting in. The river

flows out of a huge concrete pipe, big enough to walk down, and then continues on under arched branches and greenery. I know from experience that this pipe is going to haunt me – a dark tunnel I have no desire to go down but will not leave me be until I do. Places like this are red flags to local councils and government departments, places that invite ‘antisocial behaviour’. I need to get back here as soon as I can and somehow document what I find, do it properly, soak it up, get in the river and feel it, this true little patch of wilderness, or at least wildness. ‘This has always been here’, says Joe. ‘Yes’, I say, ‘it was here all along’. He is emotional. So am I, and I try to launch into some sort of soliloquy, fitting for the occasion: ‘They try to hide them and cover them up and forget about them. They build over them and change their courses but...’ I flail about searching for some metaphor to conclude, and pick the wrong one: ‘... they haven’t gone away, you know!’.

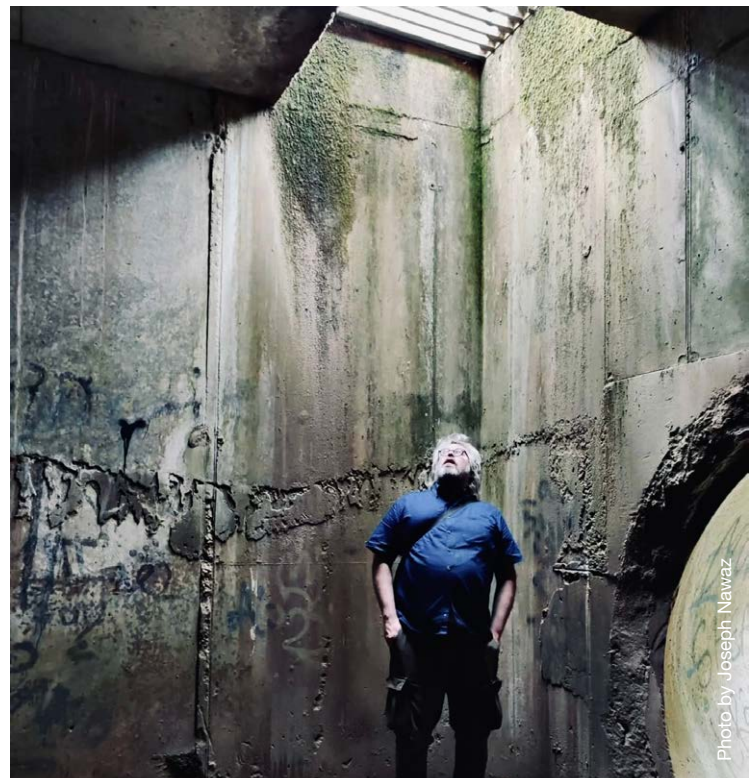


Photo by Joseph Nawaz



Photo by Catherine Devlin