

ATKINSON
GALLERY

DEFORMED SURFACES

JESSE ALEXANDER



DEFORMED SURFACES

UNCOVERING SOMERSET LANDSCAPES

JESSE ALEXANDER



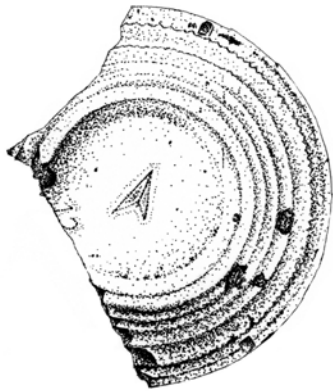
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Jesse Alexander has been preoccupied with the land and being outside since childhood, whether playing wargames in fields as a boy, traipsing after his grandmother on her farm, or walking through woods and lanes. This lifelong relationship with rural environments has evolved into a sustained, critical photographic practice spanning over two decades. *Deformed Surfaces* brings together a body of work rooted in the complex representation of the land, one that is both personally reflective and grounded, particularly in the Somerset countryside.

Emotionally invested in both town and country, Jesse's photography repeatedly engages with the visual languages, tropes, and clichés of rural Britain, sometimes embracing them, more often than not interrogating them. His work challenges the conventions of pastoral imagery. It exposes the contradictions inherent in how we aestheticise or commodify "the countryside." By turning a critical lens on these familiar forms, Jesse invites viewers to consider the distance between surface appearance and lived experience.

Time, as both subject and methodology, lies at the core of this practice. In contrast to photography's traditional role in freezing a moment, Jesse's approach slows time down. Projects emerge gradually over the years through repeated visits, accumulated observations, and learning. In works such as *Threshold Zone*, time is not merely recorded but manipulated and stretched, subverting expectations of the photographic medium. The Somerset Levels and Moors are part of a seemingly 'young' landscape, where time is not marked by ruins but by the slow accumulation of peat, layer by layer, are not romanticised but carefully observed. What results is an evocative visual language where presence and memory intertwine.

Throughout Jesse's work, a tone of quiet sobriety prevails, an atmosphere that often borders on melancholy. His images resist spectacle and embrace stillness. The weathered textures of the land, its forgotten corners and awkward juxtapositions are quietly celebrated. A subtle irony threads its way through many of these photographs, manifesting as incongruity or even surrealism: a collapsed barn framing a view like a stage set or the startling geometry of tracks carved by heavy machinery through soft fields. These moments unsettle the familiar and suggest deeper narratives at play.

Jesse's work offers a way to experience the land on multiple levels: visually, emotionally, and physically. Fields, hedgerows, and thresholds are not just subjects but also sites of transition and transformation. His images capture the traces of both human presence and absence, navigating the blurred lines between natural processes and cultural interventions.

In this way, Jesse Alexander's work offers more than visual documentation; it constitutes a form of inquiry into place, perception, memory, and meaning. *Deformed Surfaces* is not simply a collection of landscapes but a topographic exploration of what it means to look, to return, and to know a place honestly.



Jennifer Turnbull
Director of the Atkinson Gallery

Rückenfiguren

2006

I was on an assignment, scouting possible locations across Bristol for a potential reality TV show, and I found myself at fairly downbeat shopping arcade around Whitchurch, which is at the very south of Bristol. I didn't really know the area, apart from the road through Withywood, up the winding road to Dundry that I had travelled on hundreds of times going to and from my grandparents' home in the Chew Valley. I remember being struck by a narrow country road that extended from this suburban arcade, somewhat incongruously, very steeply up the east side of Dundry Hill. Usually there is some transition – some 'edgeland' – bridging town and countryside, but I was conscious of how abrupt the threshold was here.

I followed my curiosity, and this road, not much more than a track, wrecked tarmac crumbling at the edges. Potholes were filled with rubbish; there was fly tipping at every passing-place and gateway. Then I drew up to this one where two farmers were burning rubbish, and I took this picture. It immediately expressed, in an image, tensions that I felt between the urban and rural, but couldn't really put into words. It instantly took me back to Casper David Friedrich's *Wander Above a Sea of Fog*, romanticism and the sublime. The figure gazing into a landscape – a 'Rückenfigur' – like Friedrich's is a ubiquitous motif in visual culture, deployed as a tactic to immerse the viewer within the view, commonly used in advertising.

Travelling to and from Bristol via Dundry always transports me back to those childhood journeys, conflicting feelings and mixed emotions about the town and the country.



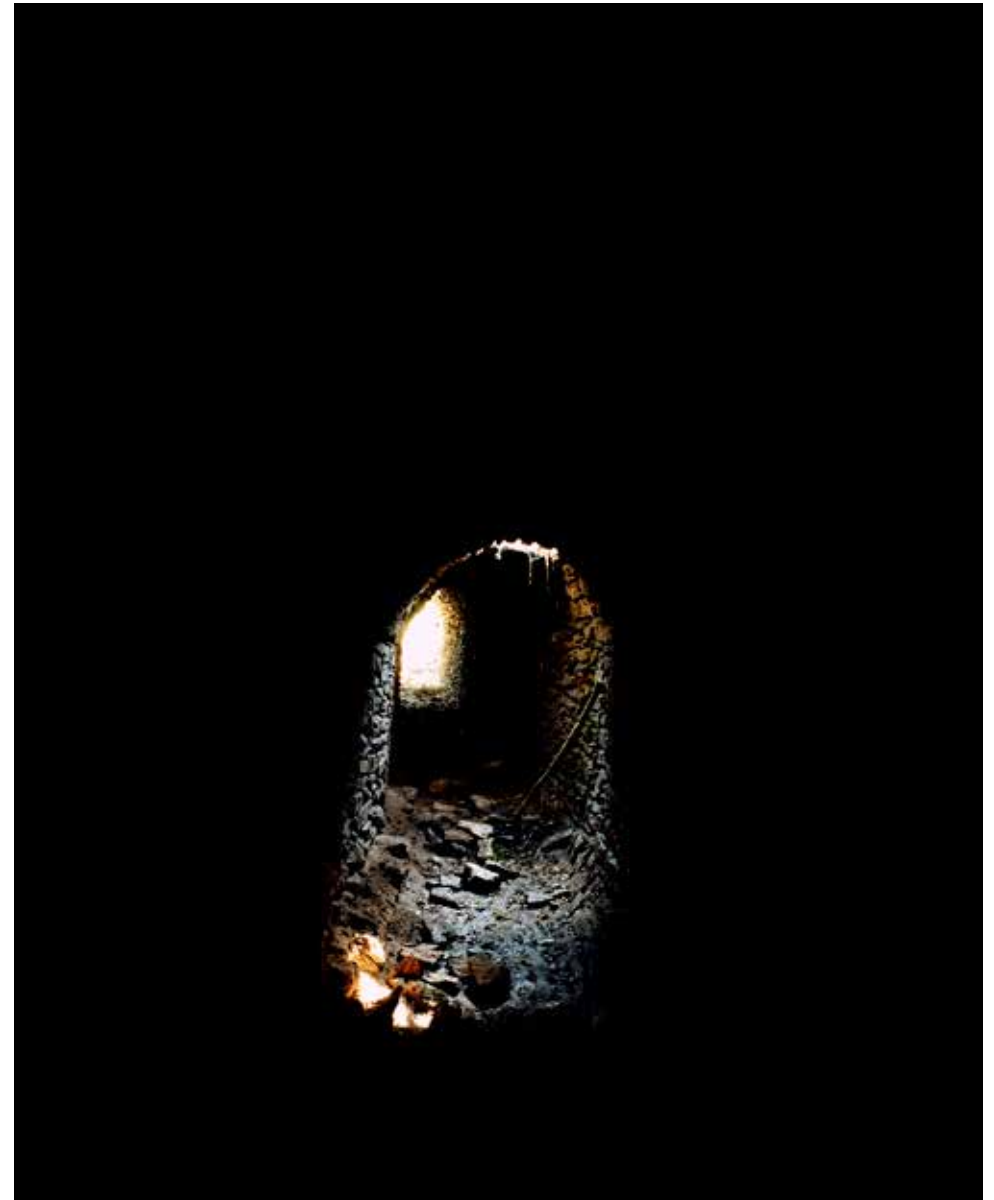
Threshold Zone

2006–2008

Although caves and the underground are culturally synonymous with the realm of beasts and where bad things can happen, they have also long functioned as sites of initiation as well as provided shelter and sanctuary. *Threshold Zone* explores this dichotomy by placing the viewer in the space between the entrances to underground spaces (referred to as the 'light zone'), and where the space enters a state of perpetual darkness – the 'dark zone'. As well as documenting sites of past industry, heritage and culture, the works attempt to inspire universal images of mythology, fantasy and science fiction.

Using a large-format camera with only available light to illuminate the subject, some locations required exposure times as long as one week to render the final image. The resulting pieces explore photography's intrinsic relationship with time, disrupting the notion of photography's ability to freeze movement and moments. The long exposure felt like a fitting method to apply to such spaces, where time elapses at a different pace to the world above.

These are among a suite of five lightboxes presented as the resolution of my MFA studies, and were fabricated especially for installation at Redcliffe Caves in Bristol, which have a rich history and mythology of their own.



Elementary Husbandry

2013–2016

Popular narratives of the spaces beyond our towns and cities as places of sanctuary and escape are sources of great personal intrigue and underpin the concerns and motivations behind *Elementary Husbandry*. This project began after I relocated from Bristol to North Somerset. Over time, my fairly opportunistic photographs began to encompass both my personal reflections on my immediate surroundings and my developing understanding of landscape representation. It was during this period that I wrote my landscape 'primer' *Perspectives on Place* and making these photographs was a welcomed foil to the more academic, screen-intensive process of drafting a textbook.

The series draws upon two founding pieces of Western literature: Hesiod's *Works and Days* (c.700 BCE) and Virgil's *Georgics* (c.40 BCE) which explore rustic themes and use rural settings to frame multifaceted narratives. These works examine a range of fundamental concerns, such as Man's ancestry, war and peace, sexuality and so on. The poems exemplify the 'pastoral' – best defined by literary critic and poet William Empson as "the process of putting the complex into the simple". These ancient texts, taking the form of a farmer's almanac, conflated practical advice for farming alongside instructions for leading a modest and virtuous existence. They are widely accepted as the prototypes for the pastoral motifs that have since become ubiquitous within depictions of the agrarian landscape.

Elementary Husbandry was exhibited at Bank Street Arts in Sheffield in 2016 and coincided with a residency that resulted in *The Nymph and the Shepherd*.



The Nymph and the Shepherd

2016–2017

Coinciding with the exhibition of *Elementary Husbandry*, this residency with Bank Street Arts in Sheffield extended my inquiry into the pastoral. Over the course of a year I would send a new photograph each week, which was printed and displayed in the gallery. Preoccupied with how pastoral imagery is often intertwined with romantic (amorous) narratives and tropes, I imagined the collaboration as a correspondence between lovers, casting myself as the ‘passionate shepherd’ and the gallery as the adored ‘nymph’.

Key to conceptualizing this project was the discovery of two late Elizabethan poems, *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love* by Christopher Marlowe written in 1599, and *The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd*, written in response by Sir Walter Raleigh the following year. These were composed at a time when European expeditions to the ‘New World’, with tales of exotic, Arcadian landscapes, excited the popular imagination and wistfulness for a long-lost Golden Age. Aping the exact structure of Marlowe’s stanzas, Raleigh’s nymph provides a line-by-line rebuttal of the ardent romantic idealism expressed by Marlowe’s shepherd.

Rather than with love poems saturated with idealised images of nature, I attempted to woo and seduce the object of my desire with documentary realism – topographic images faithfully rendering how I encountered the land over the year.



The Silent Land

2017–2021

The Silent Land observes, over several years, the Forestry Commission plantation at Stockhill Wood near Priddy in the Mendips, close to where I was living at the time. ‘Priddy Wood’, as I knew it by, remains intimately connected to my own childhood, as somewhere I was taken to regularly by my family, and I take my children there now.

Although not especially setting out to do so, I ended up recording the phenology of the forest, revisiting it regularly. I wouldn’t always take pictures: revisiting spaces, discovering new parts of the forest, recalling memories. Being surprised or disorienting myself became as important as the exposures that sometimes remained in the camera, unprocessed for months. The photographs of this, roughly, square-mile of woodland very much began to resemble to my own mindset throughout the period.

Ecologically speaking, Stockhill Wood is unremarkable, although it bears all kinds of contradictions that are typical of so many landscapes: the forest resembles what we would causally describe as ‘nature’ or ‘natural’, yet is it is mostly fastidiously managed for timber and is an important destination for leisure. It could arguably be described as an industrial landscape – it is certainly a ‘post-industrial landscape’: the trees actually grow on the site of prehistoric lead works – the remains of much more recent works are still present a just stone’s throw from the wood, and features in *Threshold Zone*. The route of a Roman road also passes through the wood. The woods hold many stories and personal experiences. Whilst there are many health benefits to being in places like these, they can be imbued with pathos and melancholy.

The Silent Land was published by VIKA in 2021. Included in the exhibition is the text ‘Coming to Light’ written in response to the series by Jacky Bowring, Professor of Landscape Architecture at Lincoln University in New Zealand and author of *A Field Guide to Melancholy*.

The Silent Land is included in the recent publication *What Makes a Photobook Sustainable?* by The Sustainable Photobook Publishing Network, and has featured in their touring exhibition and shown at several UK photo festivals as well as in Lodz and Toronto.



The Digging Season

2023

Peat has been mined in Somerset since the Roman occupation, and thereafter successive authorities have been determined to drain, shore-up, and otherwise ‘improve’ what is England’s largest wetland. Healthy bogs can sequester carbon on colossal scales, but when they dry out, stored carbon decomposes and bogs become net producers of greenhouse gasses, having a severe impact on climate change. The desiccation of the Somerset Levels and Moors has released millions of tons of CO₂ that has built up over the past seven thousand years or so. Yet whilst peat has gradually accumulated on the raised bogs of the Levels, the anaerobic conditions have secured a wealth of artefacts that are archaeologically unique and provide an understanding of ancient cultures that we would otherwise be ignorant of.

The Digging Season links topographic photographs of the final throes of the peat mining industry in Somerset with still lives of artefacts that were discovered in the process of peat cutting. Illustrations of contemporary objects collected during excursions into the Levels allude towards future possibilities for this place and encourages new narratives to unfold. These are inspired by line drawings made in the 1970s and ‘80s by the Somerset Levels Project who were responsible for much of the archaeological fieldwork on the Levels.

The video, *Deformed Surfaces*, records the experience of travelling through a typical part of this landscape: a road that is unusually straight due to the absence of features to contour around, and undulating almost comically – undermined by aggressive drainage to extract peat from even greater depths.

The project has been made possible thanks to the support of the South West Heritage Trust who generously granted access to their collections and assisted with research. *The Digging Season* is part of an ongoing exploration of the Levels, and the intersections of history, industry and ecology.





Photo: Otto Alexander

Jesse Alexander was born in Bristol in 1982. Most of his childhood weekends were spent either in the Chew Valley, North Devon or the Forest of Dean, being outdoors exploring the countryside.

In 2004 he graduated from the photography programme at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design (Farnham) and began working as a freelance commercial and editorial photographer, whilst continuing a creative practice and establishing himself as a writer on contemporary photography.

Jesse has published articles, interviews and reviews extensively in print and online journals and is the author of *Perspectives on Place: Theory and Practice in Landscape Photography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

Jesse studied Documentary Photography on the prestigious postgraduate course at Newport, and it was during this time that his passion for the land and photography began to connect.

Building on his long-term research interests in place and landscape representation, his practice has become increasingly preoccupied by the ecological crisis. Jesse is also concerned by questions around who the land really belongs to, and the privilege of accessing it.

Jesse has taught photography in a range of educational contexts, developing an expertise in distance learning, and is currently course leader for MA Photography (online) at Falmouth University.



Rückenfiguren, East Dundry
70 × 70 cm, Giclée Print, 2006



Lead Tunnel
61 × 70 cm, Duratran Print on Lightbox, 2008



Missile, Hollow Marsh
99 × 74 cm, C-Type Print, 2016



Wildfire, Priddy Ponds
84 × 60 cm, Giclée Print, 2017



Hedge, Coxley
84 × 60 cm, Giclée Print, 2017



Untilted #11
25.5 × 20.5 cm, C-Type Print, 2021



Wallway Farm, Westhay
110 × 84 cm, Giclée Print, 2023



Still from 'Deformed Surfaces'
Video: 11 minutes, 2023



Clay Pigeon, Street Moor
26.5 × 36 cm, Ink on Paper, 2023

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