Onya McCausland
Hearing from Artists

Artist portrait: Onya McCausland in her studio, London. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Jonathan Sisson

Onya McCausland examines connections between people, landscape, and colour through the process of painting. Her project Turning Landscape into Colour *(2014-present) takes her across the UK, transforming waste material from ex-mining sites into ochre pigments. She lives in London. In 2021, her work will be part of an exhibition and programme at MIMA. She is in conversation with Olivia Heron, Assistant Curator, in September 2020.*

OH: In the last few years, you have been painting with waste ochre collected from six mine water treatment schemes across the UK. How did this project begin?

OM: I began to paint landscape at art school, but gradually my interest drifted from the subject to the paint itself. *What is this viscous coloured material, and how can it possibly carry so much information or be responsible for such a translation?* Colour was both a vehicle and a barrier between an idea and a thing. I liked the names of paint colours. Lamp black, Naples yellow, Payne's grey, burnt sienna… they are visual, sensuous, evocative, strange. I started to look more closely at the formation, structure and chemistry of pigments. Thinking about what colour is led to

Aerial view of Saltburn Mine Water Treatment Scheme as seen on Google Maps. Image captured by Onya McCausland.

thinking about where it comes from, which brought me back to landscape, and the quarries, ditches, slag heaps and mines that I remembered from my childhood growing up in various parts of the UK. This evolved into questions about how the material of landscape can be used to articulate relationships, attitudes and histories of landscape. I began to travel the country looking for sites and sources of colour that are physical pieces of landscape to use in my paintings. Now I don't have to worry about 'representation' - the 'landscape' is already present in the material, inside the painting.

Google Earth is a good way of looking for quarries as they are very visible from the air. In certain places I began to notice bright orange rectilinear shaped 'lakes'. I discovered that these were mine water treatment schemes, built to manage the polluting effects of

mine water that began leaching out into rivers and drinking water supplies after large scale mining stopped in the 1980s. They filter the waste water through a series of pools. The orange residue left behind is an iron oxide, similar to other kinds of ochre used in paint. The difference is that instead of forming over hundreds of thousands or even millions of years, these ochre residues form now. Cut loose from the rock body underground, they get picked up in flows of water and transported to the surface. They are the rusts of the old coal mines.

In 1994 when the first mine water treatment sites were built they had no use for the many tonnes of waste ochre that the treatment process produced. Twenty years later in 2014, around 4000 tonnes of ochre were being sent to landfill sites every year because an economically viable use could not be found and landfill was the cheapest option.[1] I began collecting it to make paint.

OH: One of the places you collect from is at Saltburn Gill in Saltburn-by-the-Sea in the Tees Valley. Tell us more.

OM: When I first heard about the Saltburn site in 2014 it still wasn't visible on Google Earth. Saltburn Mine Water Treatment Scheme was built as a result of a 10-year campaign by a group of environmental activists who called themselves the Saltburn Gill Action Group (SGAG). It was made up of local people concerned by the environmental damage caused by an 'outbreak' generated by an underground collapse in one of the old ironstone mines that closed in the early 1960s. In 2005 this was causing bright orange ochre to pour into the sea at Saltburn-by-the-Sea. The group raised awareness and got the Environment Agency, Teesside University, the local Wildlife Trust, the Parish Council and others on board to try to find a solution to this problem. Defra provided funding via the Coal Authority and by January 2014, the first stage of the treatment process had started and the stream no longer ran bright orange. Now the site is clearly visible on Google Earth just to the

Collecting ochre at Saltburn Mine Water Treatment Scheme. Image courtesy of the artist. © Onya McCausland

north of the coast resort. It is one of the most impressive sites to look at, both from the ground and the air.

OH: How do you process the ochre you collect to create pigment?

OM: My work has developed collaboratively, involving many people with specialist knowledge of minerals, geology and chemistry, with methods of measuring pigment particle size and carrying out close-up analysis to identify what the minerals are, what they contain and how they behave. This runs alongside basic material processes of washing, drying and grinding, carried out by me in my studio. The raw iron ochre samples arrive in buckets with bits of pond weed, gravel and dirt mixed in. I wash it in plenty of water, letting the gravel and dirt sink, and the pond weed float to the surface where I can scoop it off. The coloured ochre particles stay suspended in the water, which I drain off into a clean

Red Lake, Saltburn Mine Water Treatment Scheme (2016). Image courtesy of the artist © Onya McCausland

container. Gradually over minutes, or hours – this is another way of 'measuring' particle size – the ochre settles into a sludge at the base. I drain the clear water and spread the orange sludge out on a tray to dry out. Then it is ready for milling into a fine pigment powder.

It soon became apparent that the ochre from each landscape was individual and would behave differently during this process. Ochre from the Six Bells site in South Wales for example looked dull brown suspended in water in the pond there - it was thin, watery, and without any viscous ochre 'body'. But there was a strange light underneath the brown. Only when it was rubbed between my fingers did it show an intense staining of vibrant yellow. This light and shadow is part of its character. For me this reflected the highs and lows of the South Wales valleys it forms in; it also has a technical description as a 'transparent' ochre. Saltburn on the other hand shows itself from the start. It is a clear bright yellow, clean and flat like the way the bright light reflects off the North Sea, dissipating all shadows. The paradox of Saltburn is that the brightest, yellowest of all the ochres comes up from the deepest and darkest mine.[2] There is more to these colours than their colour.

Vanishing Point #2 (2016) Hand-finished screenprint, 56 x 76 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist © Onya McCausland

OH: Your work connects to histories of painting and land art and weaves into interdisciplinary research around ecology, geology and industry. What are some of the key ideas driving your work?

OM: I am struck by Frank Stella's statement that he wanted colour in a painting to 'look as good as it did in the can.' He suggests he wants industrially produced paint to hold on to its purity, for it to contain nothing more or less than its 'fact' as paint. I relate to this, except in case of the mine ochre, the 'fact' of the colour, rather than being reductive and uniform, is heterogeneous and messy, in the way that in reality landscape and our connection with it is complex, emotional and unwieldy.

The origins of the word landscape has its roots in ideas of 'shaping' and 'seeing'. It describes a physical and perceptual relationship

between humans and the earth that has been further shaped through Western traditions of landscape painting. The colours I use are not separate from the landscape they form in. They carry the history of past events. By viewing these lakes of colour from a different position (from above, at a distance, via Google Earth), they take on a different meaning. Like giant watercolour pans in the ground, monochromes staring skyward, these ochre lagoons become an index of the events of a very recent industrial history. From this view they become collectively constructed, incidental artworks, a sort of contemporary equivalent to the Neolithic monuments scattering the country. The potent ochres filtering through them are colours in production in a landscape pigment factory. By naming them, each pigment can be recognised as an articulation of the effects of our relationship with landscape on our environment, in the past, present, and future. I am influenced by John Latham's proposal to designate the 'Five Sisters' derelict oil-shale bings in Scotland as a monument, during his Artist Placement Group residency there in 1976.

OH: How do you work with communities around the mine water treatment sites? Where will the project go next?

OM: The subterranean colours pouring out of the old mines challenge ideas of 'landscape'. Not only because they are unforeseen, uncontrolled, and polluting, but because they carry something hidden from sight. They don't just signify, but *contain* deep emotional relationships between people and land. Drawn out from deep down, they carry the spirit of the place and its past.

The people living and working with and in the ex-mining landscapes are the ones whose knowledge of it is deepest. I have been working with the community around the Six Bells site in South Wales for many months. During lockdown, watercolour sets made from the mine ochre were passed between families. We discussed how to name the colour to most appropriately

contain the history of the place and its identity, and how it could be distributed. Through our conversations they articulated how the ochres are an expression of the place, and could be a vehicle for de-demonising their industrial heritage. They recall the intensity of a close community, working in an industry that was too rapidly dismantled, so it could not be fully mourned. This month we launch the first artists' oil paint and household wall emulsion paint made from Six Bells recycled coal mine ochre residue.

I would like to develop this work in a new way in Saltburn. I'd love to hear from people with knowledge of the mines, members of the Saltburn Gill Action Group who witnessed the ochre contaminating the river and instigated the remediation programme, and others with working knowledge of the landscape to learn more about the Saltburn site and connect with its past and present. My ambition is to create a paint from the coal mine ochre at Saltburn and to enable the people in and around Saltburn and Middlesbrough to become familiar with it, use it, and ultimately to name it.

[1] The Coal Authority is now engaged in seeking and encouraging research into finding new uses for the waste ochre. There are pilot projects and innovations in sewage treatment, fertiliser, and possible use in plastics. The Coal Authority have willingly supported my project, providing access to a number of sites, facilitating material sample collection and are continuing to support ongoing work.

[2] Boulby Mine is the deepest in Great Britain.