

TERRAIN OF THE QUEER BODY  
Rosanne Robertson



*Between Two Bodies* 2020, casting process at Godrevy Point, St Ives Bay  
Photography by Sharp

All illustrated works are by Rosanne Robertson and in the collection of the artist unless otherwise stated.

## Introduction

My name is Rosanne Robertson, I am an artist based in West Cornwall and my practice spans sculpture, photography, drawing and performance to explore the boundaries of the human body and its environment. Capturing moments, schisms and shifts, my work often explores negative natural spaces to create expanded representations of the figure and reclaim a natural space for Queer identity from a history of being deemed 'against nature'.

What inspires me the most about the work of Barbara Hepworth is how she was attuned to what was around her, stating "I, the sculptor, am the landscape" and how she described having to feel her sculptures with all her body. Being open to the elements and changes and continuously experimenting takes a great sensitivity and strength which I deeply admire.

In 2019 I found myself making a journey from West Yorkshire to Cornwall and gained a deeper understanding of how landscape is a fundamental part of my practice and how a change in environment is a vital source of new inspiration and part of an ongoing process of adapting and allowing life's experience to influence creative output. I find it an enriching experience to learn of Hepworth's response to the different places she occupied and especially how the unique conditions of Cornwall allowed for such productivity and allowed for both art & life to thrive despite periods of restriction.

In this paper I reference 3 key places which I have lived and worked: Sunderland, West Yorkshire and West Cornwall.

### Roots of Steel and Coal | Sunderland

In the same way that driving around the West Riding with her father was formative for Hepworth and how she viewed the landscape in relation to sculpture – post-industrial Sunderland, the place I grew up, was a formative experience for me in terms of my relationship with the body and environment in my work.

When Hepworth talked of the landscape, she described something expansive that extends outwards and involves our whole cosmos. When I think of Hepworth's idea of the figure in the landscape - I think about the internal space of the body, the vastness of the open natural landscape, the rock edged expanse of water we are surrounded by and the vast space of the cosmos where human scale disappears in comparison.

When I talk of the figure, I include the material of the body in its physicality but also a connection with Queerness and an expanded understanding of gender and sexuality. I expand the figure via abstraction to evade rigid understandings of the figure and to connect the body and the landscape as one.

The first relationship I had with the environment I lived in was of the grey, post-industrial, tightly packed streets, and back lanes of the ex-mining cottages I lived in in Pallion in Sunderland which was an area close to the river where the docks led to the shipyards. We lived in a tiny red brick cottage, these single level dwellings were made to affordably house miners and workers. I was born in 1984 which was the year of the miner's strike and I lived there in the last half of the 80's during a depressed era that Sunderland only now seems to be recovering from. My Mam worked in factories on an evening when my Dad came home from working in demolition - pulling down what had been of Sunderland. We had very few luxuries and at times little money and food. My experience of space was of internal spaces – the tight interiors, small red brick structures, spaces of memories, back lanes, and grid like structured council housing.

I don't remember experiencing anything of a freedom and I didn't get to experience the joy of the sea until later in life despite living very close to the sea for most of my childhood. There is a daily grind to life when trying to survive in a space that felt like it was forgotten or was a hangover from a different time. I could sense this hangover or depression as a sort of emptiness even as a child, but I never really understood what this was until I was older. It was the massive impact of having giant industries taken away from a place that had collectively built its identity around it. It was also the ongoing inherited collective trauma.

Margaret Thatcher was also responsible for another gap that existed in my experience of the world through the introduction of section 28. This law which prohibited the 'promotion of homosexuality' made sure I grew up with no positive representation of who I was and filled that space with fear. As a working class young gay woman there were massive voids when I look out at the world around me which I learned I had to fill in for myself and find a way to navigate.

My connection to my environment and to those around me was fractured at a young age due to the violence of stepping outside of gender norms and heteronormative society.

I cannot ignore this 'fracture'- it is a gap that must be traversed, freedoms have to be sought out and fought for.



*Interior 2018 - ongoing*  
Suspended red brick ceiling sculptural installation with sound  
400 red bricks, nylon cord, steel scaffold structure



*Interior* 2018 - ongoing (detail)

*Interior* is an assembled sculpture, sound and performance which consists of a suspended ceiling of 400 red bricks held by a large scaffold frame via individual nylon chords. I built this large-scale sculptural installation in 2019 at Auxiliary Gallery in Middlesbrough.

Materials of labour are used referencing my father's work and my working-class upbringing in Sunderland - using the red bricks that surrounded me during formative moments. Red bricks are porous and the size of hands, bodily and are smaller parts of much bigger structures. They connect our bodies and human capacity with the environments we live in. This sculptural canopy creates a heavily charged space with the weight of 400 red bricks just above head height, an oppressive space but also a space of intimacy with the delicate sound of the red bricks lightly hitting in each other in a subtle composition of textured sounds.

## Stone (Butch) | West Yorkshire

West Yorkshire is the place that I connected directly with the natural landscape. After a period living in Manchester where I went to art school, I moved to Todmorden and then Hebden Bridge which are both towns in Calderdale, West Yorkshire.

In 2019 I was selected as an associate artist of Yorkshire Sculpture International and was paired with The Hepworth Wakefield who supported my practice for a period of 9 months. I had begun to work directly with the land inspired by artists such as Ana Mendieta and made works such as *To the Ground* in which I cut the shape of my body out of red sand on a beach in Portugal and presented the earth-stained white vest as an assembled sculpture.



*To the Ground* 2018  
Assembled sculpture. White vest, red sandstone, and aluminium

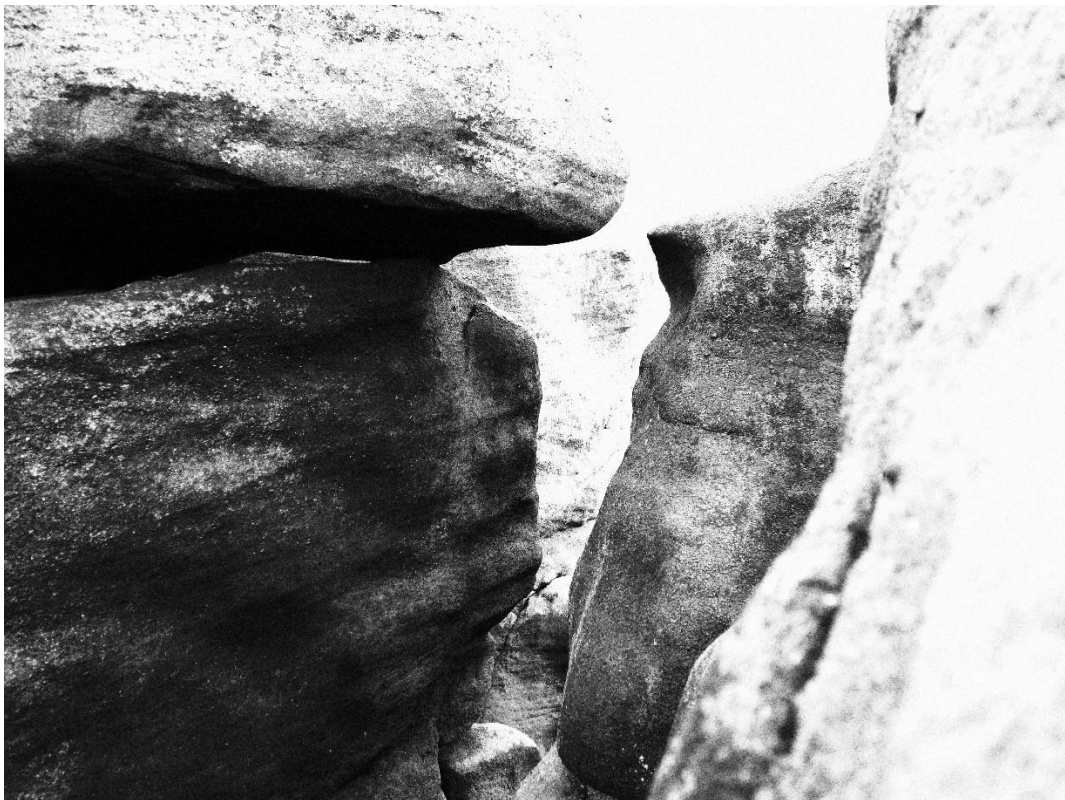


*Pissing* 2018 (still)  
Performance for camera filmed in St Ives

I had also filmed a 'performance for camera' titled *Pissing* in a rock crevice in St Ives. I continued this journey but now with a focus on the landscape in which I lived and worked in. I took my studio outside on a continuous basis for the first time.

I began a period of experimentation which involved a walk from my studio which was situated in the bottom of the valley and up onto 'the tops' and to the Bridestone Moor. At first, I was interested in the shape of the valley and the shape of the land - how it is cut, carved, and shaped by water, and also the light and dark contrast of the shadow cast by the steep valley sides. The experience of walking up into the light and open expanse of the moors was the first time I had experienced the real freedom and scope of the open landscape in comparison to the built up, packed in and urban environments I had inhabited previously.

I took photographs from which I later made photo collage and drawings, and I carried out bodily interventions or performance within the waterways that ran through the side of the valley. I then focussed on a set of stones at the end of the walk called The Bridestones. I took a set of black and white photographs as studies which focussed on the texture of the grit stone and the negative space between the stones. I viewed this set of stones as a free form set of fluid 'bodies' and began to think of the idea of The Queer body in the landscape. I considered the act of connecting characteristics from nature with our gender - i.e., the term 'Stone Butch' or with the idea of gender fluidity and also how we use terms such as hard and soft in relation to masculinity and femininity.



*Photographic studies of The Bridestones 2019*



I was interested in the contradiction within the depiction of stone being strong and unyielding and water being soft and yielding more easily, when stone is shaped by water and water has the strength to shape the landscape. I believe in a less binary situation or a more Queer situation in which stone and water are in a continuous fluid motion or transition.



stonebodywater 2020  
Performance for camera

The term 'Stone Butch' became a focus and I later tilted the overall body of works from what became a 2-year period as *Stone (Butch)*. Stone Butch is a term that was handed down to me from a previous generation of lesbians, it is a term that was popularised in the 1990's by lesbian and trans activist Les Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues*. It was a term that still resonated with my own gender and my relationship with masculinity despite originating with an older generation.

The following quote from *Stone Butch Blues* led me to focus on the idea of the 'terrain' of the body and the idea of a raincoat layer.

*"The cops picked out the most stone butch of them all to destroy with humiliation, a woman everyone said, wore a raincoat in the shower."*

It is this raincoat layer, thick skin, or barrier that I am interested in as a terrain and this is the terrain of the *Stone (Butch)* works.

I began a process during this time of casting directly in the cracks and crevices of The Bridestones. The process of casting directly from the cracked stones turns a negative space into a positive one to see what that feels like and looks like. It is a new space which belongs to both the landscape and the body at the same time. The title *chasmschism* refers to the physical void of the chasm and the mental void of the schism, and considers these two things as the same form.



Direct plaster casting at The Bridestones for the *chasmschism* sculptures

There is a very real violence that is inherent within the period of history depicted in Stone Butch Blues – of a moment between the worst violent oppression and moments of moving toward liberation between 1960 - 1980. By working with the void, the crack or the schism I centre on a transformative space of something that is shifting from one situation into another.

There continues to be something about Queerness and also gender nonconformity that threatens a heterosexual and cis-gendered dominated patriarchal power structure, and the joy or the power of Queerness is restricted by this fear. Within this work I aim to find an 'other' space which is a space for freedom. In the way that the Circle publication, which was published in 1937, had a belief that abstract art was in opposition to totalitarianism I have a belief that totalitarianism involves this single or binary understanding of sexuality and gender which must be shattered.



*chasmchism*, *Stone (Butch) Terrain* and *Pissing* exhibited at The Hepworth Wakefield for Yorkshire Sculpture International 2019  
Photography by Nick Singleton

## Between Two Bodies | West Cornwall

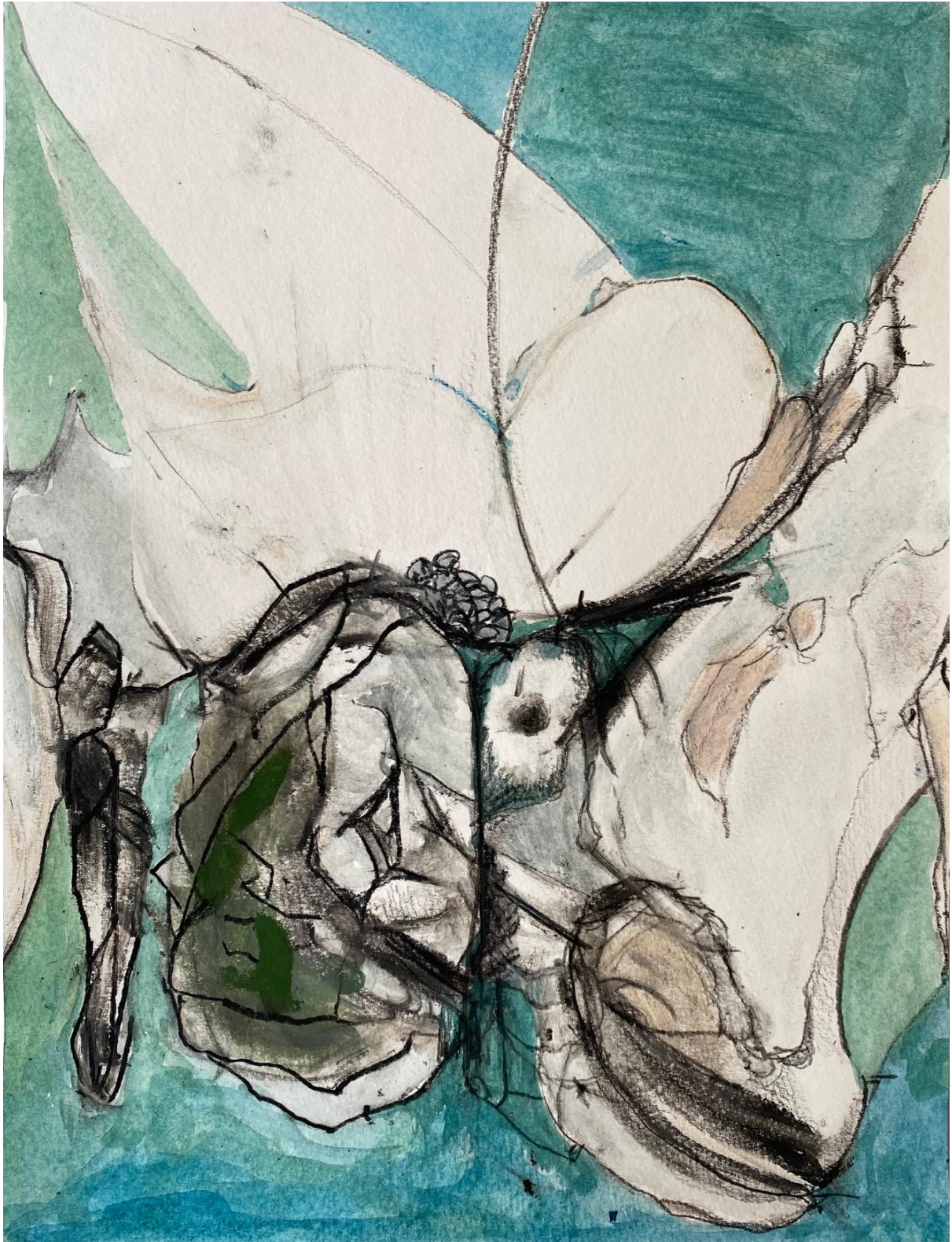
Hepworth describes how an idea can be formed in childhood and returned to repeatedly, she describes this in relation to her first experience of travelling around West Riding and her ideas regarding the figure in the landscape. I feel a connection with this and understand my own process as something that began in childhood. I believe we take ideas with us and see them in a different light, that we can return to the same idea further down the line with more experience and approach it in a new way. For me I am carrying ideas and my work into a new light, the light of Cornwall which provides clarity of vision.



All four *chasmschism* sculptures installed at studio 9 Porthmeor Studios, St Ives

When I first relocated to West Cornwall at the end of 2019, I felt I could see things with new eyes. There is less noise, fewer distractions, and more space in terms of the open expanse of the sea. The ever-changing rocky coastal landscape with the renewing energy of the incoming and outgoing tide provides continuous inspiration.

Between January – July 2020 I was a short-let studio holder at Porthmeor studios in St Ives. I began a way of producing drawings whilst here which involved using my full body and made at first with my eyes closed – these drawings were based on memory, dreams, bodily sensations, and the physical memory of climbing and swimming around the rocky headland of Godrevy Point across St Ives Bay.



*Island (compressed form in mid-summer) 2020*  
Gouache, charcoal, and graphite on paper



*Island (with undercurrent) 2020*  
Gouache, charcoal, and graphite on paper

These works are made by laying out a large roll of paper on the studio floor and working on what starts as a loose arrangement of 'bodies', 'islands' and 'stacks' which then emerge as more defined compositions as I work on each in a cyclical way. Since mid-2020 I have used the cyan and blue colour range to surround the abstract forms which can be seen as standing forms or also in some instances aerial views of formations surrounded by water.

Whilst working with the seascape as a backdrop I consider the motion and the power of the sea, and return to a relationship with the sea that remained unformed when I was younger. Cornwall offers a much more physical relationship with my environment. Swimming in the sea and swimming around stacks of rock and down what feels like watery rock-lined channels, and streets of water, has allowed me to occupy the materials of stone and water in a completely new and all-encompassing way.



*The Island 2020*  
Charcoal, gouache and graphite  
Wakefield Permanent Art Collection (The Hepworth Wakefield)

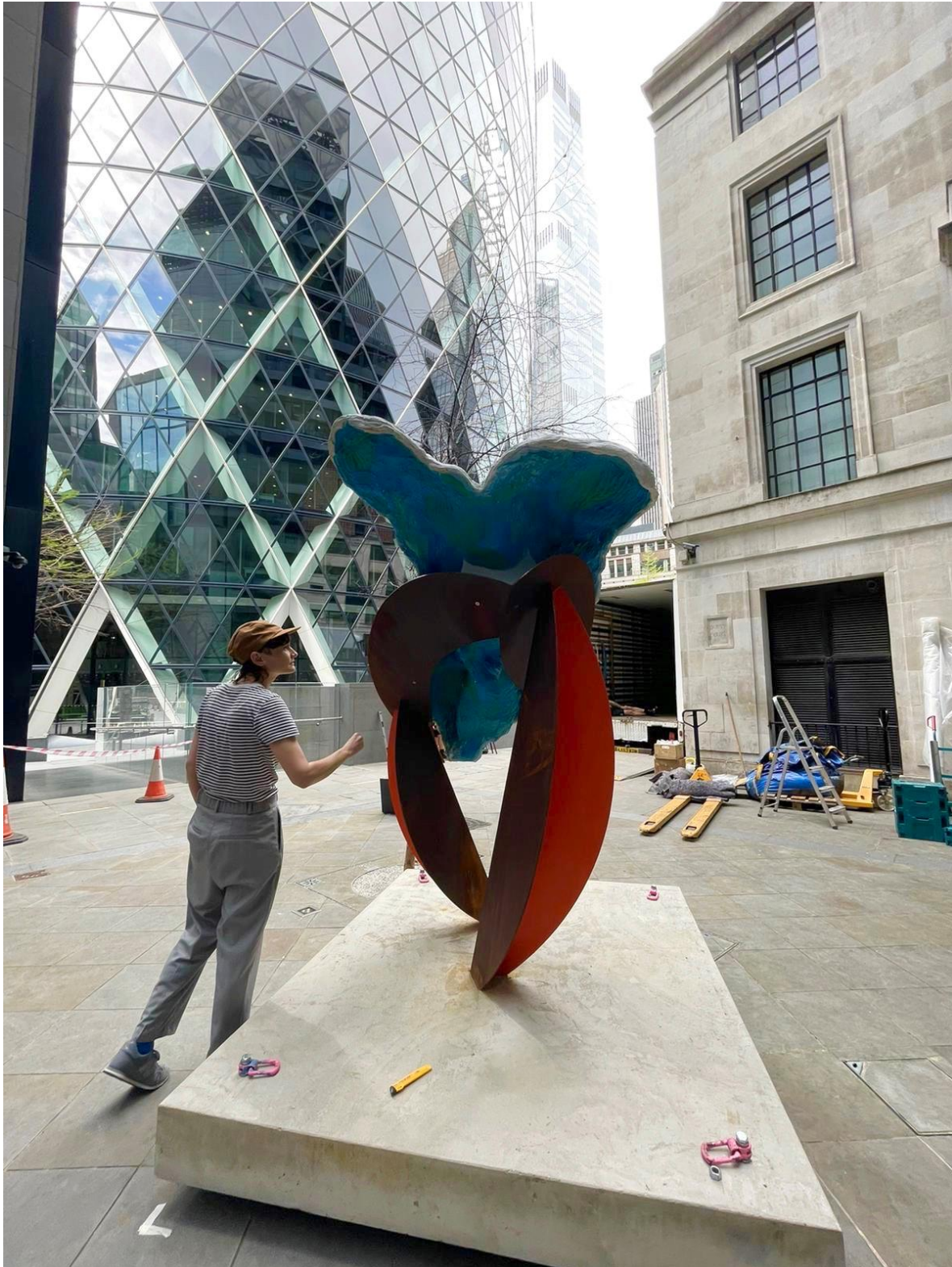
During 2020 I made the last of the 'sculptural void' casts which were made at low tide in cracks made by the sea at Godrevy Point. I paired one of these casts with a cast made at the Bridestones – one was made in jesmonite which resembles plaster and the other in the 'grey granite' variety of jesmonite. These sculptures were painted in greens and blues on their undersides with the top surfaces marked in a similar way as when I create the works on paper via automatic mark making. I titled these works *Between Two Bodies* which connects with my experience of non-binary gender and also with the geographical space between the two works and the idea of being between two bodies of stone or two bodies of water.



*Between Two Bodies* and *The Island* 2020  
Installation images from *Vision & Reality* at The Hepworth Wakefield, 2020  
Wakefield Permanent Art Collection (The Hepworth Wakefield)



The last of these casts were used to create my first public sculpture which was made from a jesmonite cast upheld by a weathering corten steel sculpture. This sculpture is the ultimate work from the *Stone (Butch)* body of works and has its first exhibition in London for Sculpture in the City 2021-22.



*Stone (Butch)* 2021. Public sculpture install for Sculpture in the City



*Stone (Butch)* 2021  
Corten steel, jesmonite and paint  
Exhibited for Sculpture in the City's 10<sup>th</sup> edition 2021-22

Having now worked and lived in Cornwall for 18 months, with most of that during a global pandemic, I can feel a very real connection with Hepworth's descriptions of living in Cornwall during war time – when activities were stopped, beaches were empty and sail boats no longer took to the water. My time at Porthmeor Studios was spent looking at the deserted white sands of Porthmeor beach. This period has changed me as a person, as it has for us all, and has changed my work. I felt I could either let this time facing the sea change me or not, the palette of the Cornish coastal landscape could either infiltrate or not. My whole process is about being open to influence and change and so over the last 12 months cyans and blues wash through most of my works, and I have a new relationship with colour. This infiltration of colour and of water is a cleansing process of renewal and an acceptance of the joy of this place.



*Stone (Butch)* 2021  
Corten steel, jesmonite and paint  
Exhibited for Sculpture in the City's 10<sup>th</sup> edition 2021-22  
Photography by Nick Turpin

BASED ON A PAPER GIVEN AT THE HEPWORTH RESEARCH NETWORK LAUNCH 12-13 MARCH 2020