

Niru Ratnam

Emma Cousin | Artist Statement

*Blood, Fish and Bone*

Blood fish and bone is an organic, slow-release fertilizer derived from the by-products of slaughterhouses and fish processing plants. It is used to replenish a system under pressure.

These paintings signal a world building exercise, made in a constellation of themes that net mapping deep sea, aquatic science, geology, landscape history, gardening, anatomy, weather, with autobiographical elements, all reflected in how the paintings fold in on themselves. If the fold is about taking out the edges, then I am invested in where the boundaries get confused, the edges of myself and the body and space around it.

*Blood is nitrogen. It is green for growing/*

Working on the drawings between the studio and home and even attempted on the move and outdoors, leaves trails. You can work with the crumbs, adhering a little to the finger and smudging it. We operate in endless rings of constriction and measurement often forcing our view inward-relationships; 'parenting'; digestion; the constant dying and trying to live; blocked pores; memory; relentless colds; sinus issues; rubbish disposal; weather; hormones; money - all heat and weight.

An article titled 'Scientists Discover Children's Cells Living in Mothers' Brains'<sup>1</sup> declared that 'blood' is a genuine biological phenomenon; foetal cells cross the placenta during pregnancy and migrate into the mother's bloodstream, lodging in her organs. These foreign cells can persist in the mother's brain, heart, liver, and skin for decades. The way charcoal works, drawing into and over itself, seems to swallow forms and spit out new ones.

Pressure of encroachment on my studio, which is currently wrapped in building work on all sides dominates. I am now locked in between towering concrete structures that will become flats that look onto the Asda carpark. They have stolen my view which now has a vertical emphasis. Grattacielo; The building scratching the sky.

The landscape and our 'view' appearing and reappearing is one of the structures to build 'landscape spaces' in the paintings. This collapsing of space and time seemed to ricochet in the hammering and spreading of the building site, literally changing daily, taking away and stacking up. In a desperate attempt forced by this tension and the stress of making these painting's spaces fit together, I filled a 'gap' in one painting with the view out of my window. This scape now only exists in the painting.

*Fish is nitrogen and calcium. It makes colours brighter/*

The paintings are about moving in and out. Looking into the 'tank', being the tank, being the fish in the tank; I sought out fish tanks in restaurants. Tanked as a feeling, a setting, an object, a psychological space and salve and a geometrical perspective device. The fish I'd painted, via many revolutions of finding and losing a face and shifting the features about, told me how to paint his reflection. Painting him upside down, wet into wet, moving the paint like ink in water, mixing with itself and the surface. How to paint water? Can a body become aquatic via paint? Is it possible to paint a psychological position? To sink or swim.

Fish do not have three second memories but in fact have excellent recall long-term. I have had to work on my long-term memory for this work. Building space on paper from remembered landscape, offers a different pace to the marks and where the image builds from and where it ends.

We imagine fish in their natural environment as free, but fish even in the wild are contained within zones that are pressurised systems that they are unable to move beyond.

*Bone is phosphate and calcium. It makes fruits sweeter/*

On a short residency<sup>2</sup> that insisted on the use of charcoal solely, I was forced to get to grips with it- I found it messy, crumbly and unruly. It also gave you away, breaking and being broken was part of playing with it. Structural and vulnerable, like bone. In one exercise we were asked to copy a black and white print out of an old master, with charcoal. Then, after a break, draw from memory. The first marks were proportional plotting, how the image was separated. Thirds, horizons, planes. Next the angles, then the light. None of my recall was figurative.

The drawing allows convolutions and complex permutations is, for me, its magic in contrast to linguistic attempts to capture and communicate. Weight is implicit in drawing, and relay can be managed lightly if wanted. In charcoal, the negative space can become the form or the void, and this oscillation allows an improv that jostles the idea and finding the feeling around. Shape and line also become possible to interchange.

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<sup>1</sup> Scientific American. By Robert Martone. 4<sup>th</sup> December 2012

<sup>2</sup> Body and Place Residency. 2025.

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“One of the most extraordinary widespread sounds of the undersea is the crackling sizzling sound, like dry twigs burning or fat frying. Biologists heard ‘high pitched resonant whistles and squeals, varied with the tickling and clucking sounds slightly reminiscent of a string orchestra tuning up.’<sup>3</sup>

My squeaking snapping charcoal when I am drawing, lost in it and following its line like a trusting animal relates.

Sometimes the charcoal blocked textured shape seems to be attending, as if waiting. In gardening, the gaps are space themselves, frames of a sort. Planting schemes include aerial and cross elevations, indicating what will take up space vertically and horizontally simultaneously, mapping neighbours and what is seen through and underneath. The experience of scale has to do with perspective. Tectonics was discovered in 1960. The land we stand on, that above and below us, is in constant motion and transformation. It makes the painting attempt less absurd.

The future is based on a different building device, a mapping of things known as facsimile and things not yet known, *‘opening up paradigms of knowledge by the maps edges, and how a map is read, made and re made together.’<sup>4</sup>*

A painting is a jigsaw, taking something apart and putting it back together. The paintings become an archeological record of this mapping process and the veins through them connect the multiple themes. The hues relate to the thing inside the thing, the projectile spectrum, the imagined subterranean and anatomical and medical and mapping diagram palettes. And of course, this puts the paintings under pressure - to perform all this, in the present tense.

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<sup>3</sup> The Sea Around Us. Rachel Carson. Published by Oxford University Press 1991.

<sup>4</sup> The word for world: The Maps of Ursula K Le Quin. Edited by So Mayer and Sarah Shin.