

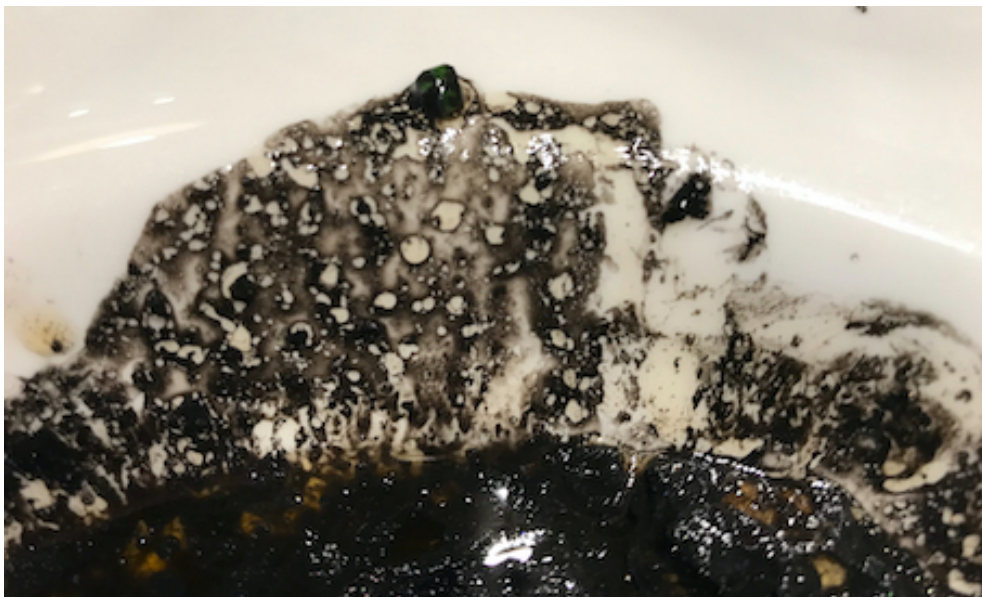
Joya Time

In the summer of 2019, I was accepted for a two week arts residency with Joya:AIR, scheduled for March 2020. Set up as a not-for-profit by Simon and Donna Beckman, Joya:AIR is based at their home at the Cortijada Los Gázquez, nestling in the Sierra María-Los Vélez Natural Park in Almería, Spain. After two years of Covid delays, we finally made it to Los Gázquez in late March 2022.



Bamboo fence and olive tree

In keeping with our decision to minimise flying, we travelled down to Valencia by train, with stop-overs in Paris (one night), Barcelona (two nights) and Valencia (one night). This type of travel takes time and is much more expensive than a flight, but wandering around these cities, enjoying the architecture and galleries and walking the narrow alleyways and cobbled streets became part of the adventure. Our eyes were always seeking out interesting places to eat, for the food – particularly in Barcelona and Valencia – is always a temptation for us.



Squid ink on white plate – a work of art in itself!

We'd hoped for the brilliantly blue, cloudless skies of a Spanish spring but an unusually cold, wet weather system had locked in over the region bringing unceasing rain for weeks on end. Once in Valencia, we watched news broadcasts of the failure of the almond harvest – a devastating blow for the local farmers. As we travelled, we kept in touch with Simon who warned us our hire car wouldn't make it down the 4 kilometre track to Los Gázquez - he dropped us a pin showing where we could leave our car (the local village cemetery) and from there, we chucked the luggage in the back of the Landrover and headed out. Ten minutes later we turned off the tarmac and ventured on to the curdled, creamy-brown, rutted track. The slow and careful progress gave us time to watch the landscape unfold and appreciate just how far off the beaten track we were going.



Simon and Donna spent 2 to 3 years connecting a series of farm buildings to create studios, communal areas and residential spaces, resulting in an irregular, long rectangular building with thick walls and interesting chimney stacks.

The land is under continuous care with the aim of restoring the plant and animal life relative to the region and the climate.



Wildflowers..., a few days later they were covered in snow.

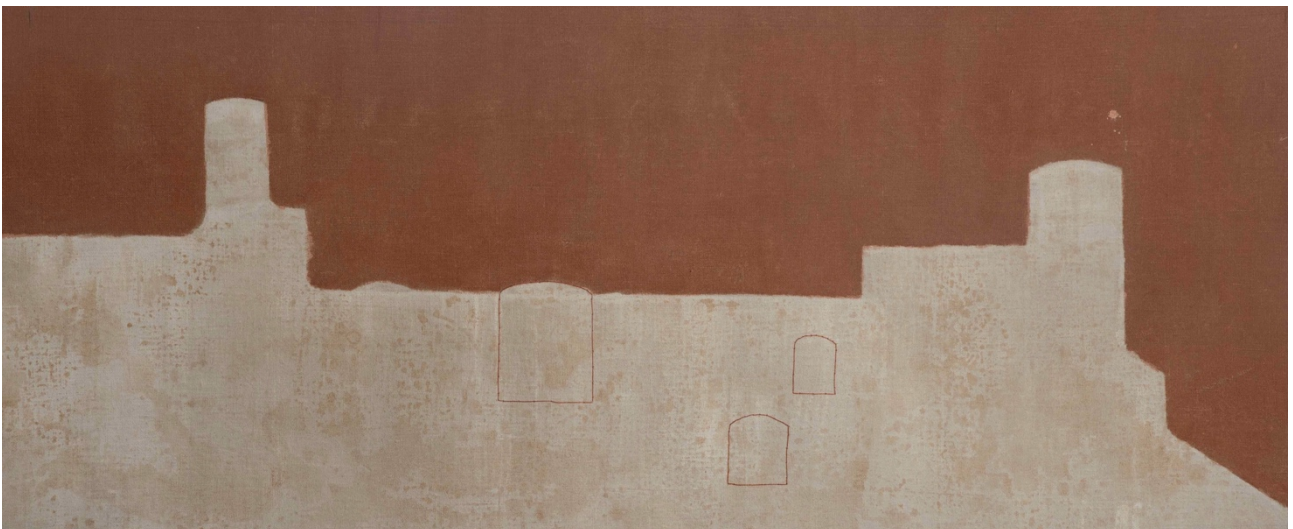


To assist in the restoration of the land, its flora and its fauna, Simon is determined to bring the old water catchment system back to life – catching and directing rainfall and run-off from the slopes into collection basins and into the fields.

The entire facility is off-grid, powered by sun, wind and a biomass boiler for hot water and underfloor heating. Wood and kindling were a source of anxiety for Simon as the lack of sun meant the log pile was going down at a much faster rate than usual, and the conditions meant collecting wood or getting it delivered were tricky. An extra sweater and good socks were all that were needed, and I can't say we were ever cold.

'Let the Water Flow', detail

My plan was to collect, process and use pigment from the region. Driving up from Valencia, I'd been excited by the range of colour in the clay; red-orange, rust, yellow, dusky purple, blue-grey and black. The weather was so poor I couldn't get off the site to collect these so had to be content with the colours around Los Gázquez, which ranged from a creamy off-white to a pale yellow. A great deal of Saharan sand had also been blown in and not long before we arrived, this sand had turned the sky orange and tinted the farmhouse from white to pale apricot.



My translation of Simon's photograph of the sand-loaded sky.
The colour on the building is Saharan dust I collected from drainage gullies.



As soon as the rain took a break we went out with a bucket, tubs and trowels and got pretty dirty messing about in the clay. My studio had a small wood-burner and using tin foil (and latterly, pizza tins) as a base, I dried and ground these soft colours, using them to complement the pigments I'd brought with me.

Rather than drawing inspiration from the landscape (my usual preference) I found myself looking at what lay within the vicinity of the farmhouse: strange little bamboo fences, small derelict stone structures with disintegrating window and door frames, small apertures cut into walls, and the shape of the farmhouse itself.

The chimney serving the woodstove in my studio space.



The little derelict building will one day house a wood-burning oven. The image on the right shows one of the little apertures within some of the courtyard areas.



Another aperture in a lovely textured wall

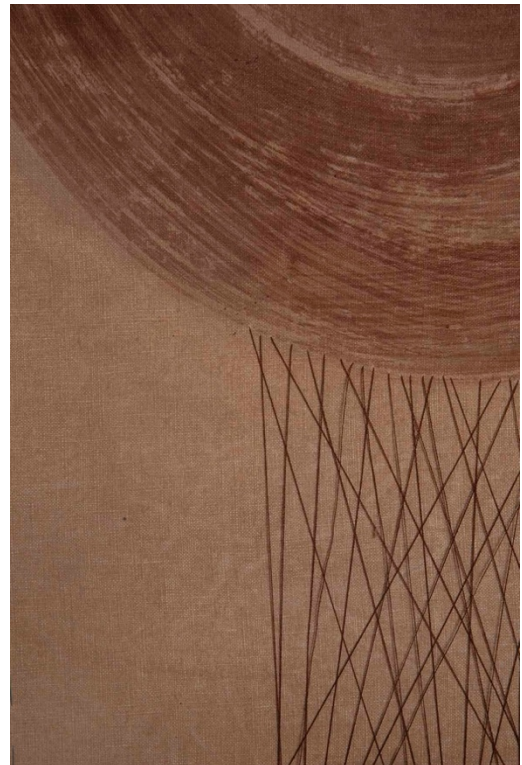
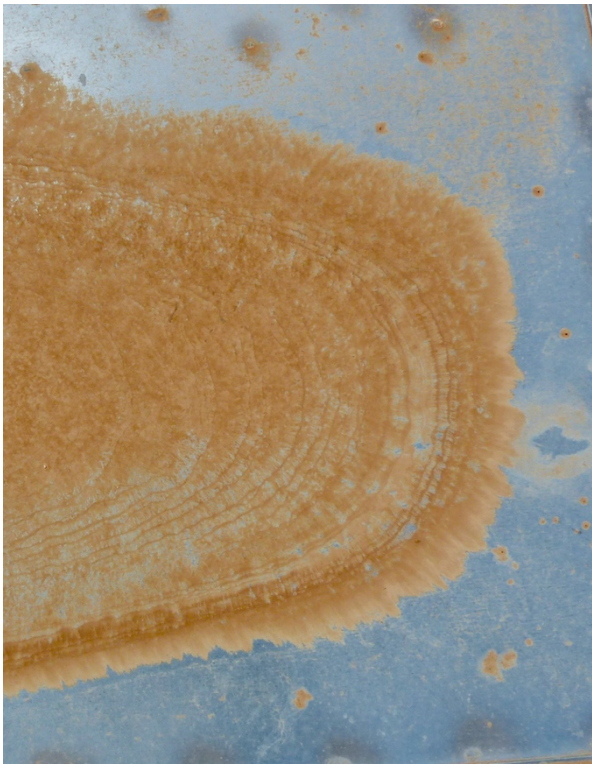


'Aperture'



The view from my studio..., on a sunny day.

Although I couldn't work directly on the soil, I was able to work outside on the two or three sunny days we did get. My studio had a concrete slab outside that offered line and texture, as did a weathered table made from plywood. Sand deposits connected the Sahara to Los Gázquez and I worked with it in situ, laying down soya-soaked linen directly on to the dried-out pigment, using a large paintbrush to pick up more colour and scrub it in.



Saharan sand on aluminium (left). Detail of 'Connected' (right)



My time was spent soaking soya beans, making soya milk, processing collected pigment, choosing colours to make soya paint and working that into linen pre-sized with soya milk. I'd cut linen to a size that when rolled, would fit into my suitcase – twenty pieces in total. These proved to be the perfect size as I could fit four at a time on the workbench and once I'd strung up a line, I could also hang pieces up to properly dry and start curing.

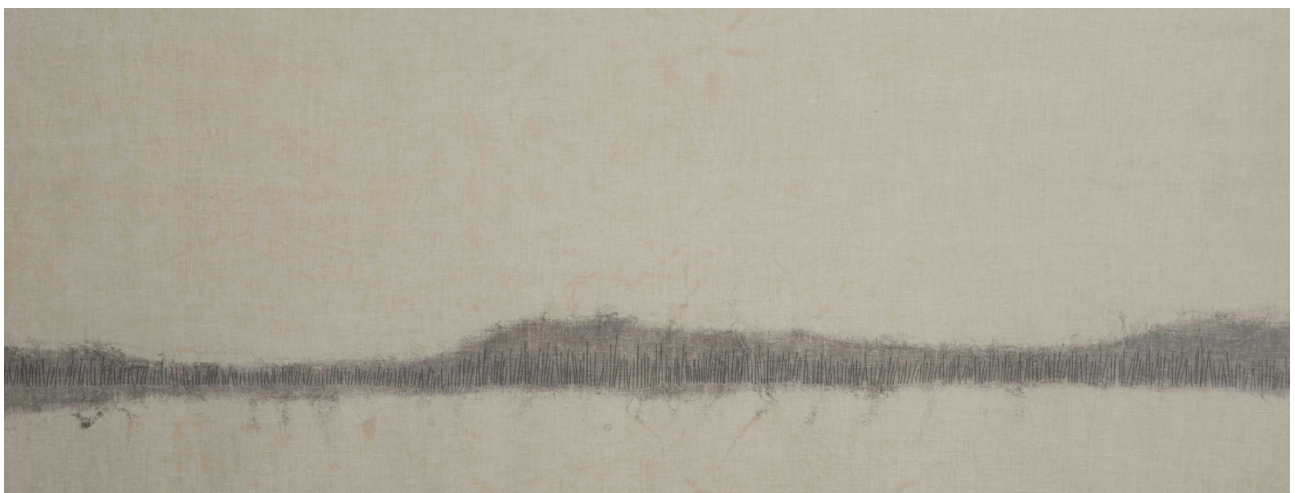
Once my workbench was occupied with wet cloth, I spent time reviewing my output, deciding next steps, thinking, writing and sketching. I've never been interested in pre-planning my work, preferring to focus on something that inspires me, getting a sense of it down on to the cloth and then figuring out how to move things forward. A 'call and response' way of working that's always suited me.

The poor weather didn't slow me down and I suspect more sunshine would have tempted me to find a sheltered corner and spend time gazing, reading and snoozing! I do confess to taking a short break after lunch most days, in the spirit of the siesta, but was generally pretty focused and working hard. Evenings often began with a presentation from a fellow artist, followed by a meal of truly delicious home-cooked food. The conversation was lively and although some returned to their studios for evening work, most of us chose to gather in front of the sitting-room wood stove and chat.

At the end of the first week Simon announced that on the coming Monday, snow was expected. One of the artists was due to leave on the Sunday so James and I decided to grab the chance of a lift to our car, take a break and head out to Granada for two days, with a plan to return on Tuesday. On Monday night, we got a text; forget returning on Tuesday..., so much snow had fallen the track was impassable, even by Landrover.

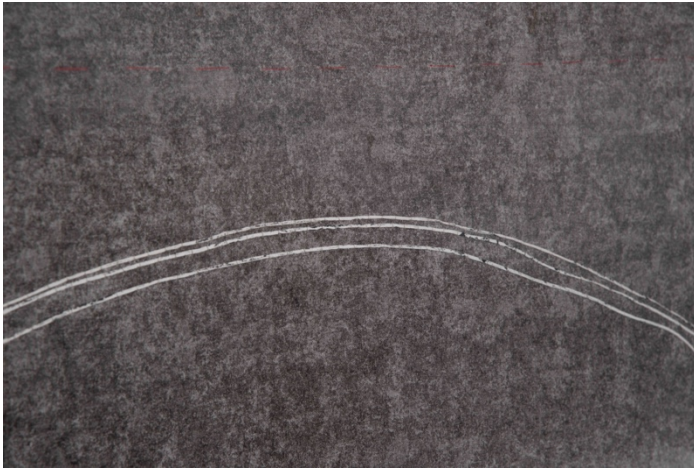


Unseasonal snow (image, Simon Beckmann)



'Unseasonal Snow'; I collected and processed the off-white pigment from the fields around Los Gázquez.

Hotel space wasn't a problem at that time of year and Granada is an easy place to spend time in, so one more day wasn't a disaster. By mid-afternoon Wednesday the track was (just) passable and once again, we met at the cemetery carpark for the drive back to Los Gázquez.



'Another Planet Rises', detail

Seeing the landscape covered in snow was a treat and standing outside that evening, we encountered a sky of velvety black, speckled with stars. A huge moon slowly rose behind the hills, washing the snow-covered landscape in silver. Sunshine returned on Thursday and by midday, the snow had melted and I took the opportunity to work wet, knowing that I needed to use Friday to get the last few pieces dry and ready to pack.

Ultimately, Joya gave me space. Space in the form of a studio. Space in the grandeur of the landscape. Space for my head to think – or simply float. Space for my body to work, walk, or rest. Joya also meant distance from the clamour, demands, interruptions and noise of everyday life. Joya gave me an existence within deep silence with only the sound of the wind, the humming of bees, the cry of birds and after dark, the calling of frogs and the subtle vibration of the vast night sky.

This last image is of some graffiti we saw in Granada. It translates to "In Life, sometimes you win and sometimes you learn." We did both at Los Gázquez so thank you, Simon and Donna. Thank you for having the vision and the will to make Joya:AIR what it is and for continuing to regenerate the land and help bring this region back to life.



"In life, sometimes you win and sometimes you learn"

www.joya-AIR.org

A new catalogue of work called 'Here & There' will be available on my website from the end of January 2023 and covers work drawn from or made at Los Gázquez, along with other pieces inspired by jaunts in (mainly) the British Isles.



Some of this body of work will also be on exhibition with two galleries:

- **'Earth Materials'**, Gallery 57, Arundel, 4th February to 16th April 2023, www.gallery57.co.uk
- **Flow Gallery**, Notting Hill, London, 27th January to 17th March, www.flowgallery.co.uk
- **Flow Gallery** at Collect, organised by the Crafts Council, Somerset House, London, 1st to 5th March 2023 www.craftscouncil.org.uk

And finally...



FIBRE ARTS | TAKE TWO
ONLINE COURSES

For those of you who want to learn how to work with earth pigments and soya milk on cloth, I have a new online workshop called '**Out of this Earth**' which will go live with Fibre Arts Take Two in early March. You can register interest now through their website and online registration will start on 17th February. Fibre Arts Take Two has a superb range of online workshops, particularly useful for those living in far-flung corners of the world, so do take a look as there may be other content to inspire and educate; www.fibreartstaketwo.com