

Image and Ascent: Mountain Terrains in the History of Art
Abstract for presentation
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Abstract and Working Title:

Moving a Mountain: The Distance and Presence of the 14th-Century Wilderness Image.

The wilderness landscapes of 14th-century Franciscan painting signified places set apart from daily life in which miracles and spiritual transformations occurred. These were penitential places that elicited a spiritual transaction: from the depicted holy figures; and from travellers to the landscapes themselves, which housed the remote shrines and holy places of pilgrimage. This paper explores the agential potency of these mountainous and inhospitable terrains through a discussion of my current art practice, whereby depictions of wilderness are taken out of their medieval context and constructed as palpable art objects in the present. This process enables the work to straddle past and present concerns, reflecting on notions of distance, and obversely, of presence.

These mountainous backgrounds with their caves and craggy ravines denote an embodied rather than exclusively visual experience of landscape. In this way they draw the latter away from its position as de facto representational image – with its spatial concerns – and direct it towards a radical anti-Cartesian construction which powerfully suggests space *and* time while collapsing the habitual subject/object distinctions through which it has traditionally been organised. As such they are places that redistribute the hierarchy of viewing subject and landscape object, offering instead the possibility of an alignment between human and landscape more fitting for 21st-century concerns.

The spiritual implications of these early depictions of wilderness are contrasted with the wilderness of our material and industrial present. How can wilderness be imagined in the Anthropocene, and what kind of transformative power can we tap from these images today?

Biography:

Henrietta Simson is an artist whose work explores the landscape image through its historical and cultural development, and current definitions within a digital context framed by ecological crisis. Her research draws from late medieval and early Renaissance imagery, presenting ideas of landscape that challenge its designation within human/nonhuman dichotomies and that facilitate a critical questioning of the visual structuring of space. She completed an MA in painting at the Slade School of Fine Art in 2007, and then a practice-related PhD in 2017, supervised by Professor Joy Sleeman, Professor Alison Wright and Lisa Milroy RA, with the thesis title, *Landscape After Landscape, Pre-Genre Backgrounds in a Post-Genre Digital Age*. In 2011 she won the Threadneedle Prize for Painting and Sculpture, and her work and writing have been exhibited and published widely. She has taught at the Slade School of Fine Art and currently at the University of the Arts, London.