

Helen Carnac Liminal Landscapes

BY MARJORIE SIMON



Side by Side, 2012
Performance with Siobhan Davies
Dance Studios, London
PHOTO: GORM ASHURST

Work table, 2011
vitreous enamel vessel on
mixed media landscape
PHOTO: HELEN CARNAC





Side by Side, 2012
Performance with Siobhan Davies Dance
Studios, London
PHOTO: HELEN CARNAC

Milwaukee Street View, 2006
PHOTO: HELEN CARNAC

IN “LAYOUT,” A VIDEO lasting twelve seconds, assorted objects—hand tools, work samples, photos—appear one by one on a white table. The resulting composition is the *modus operandi* of eclectic British metalsmith Helen Carnac. The video was made in the summer of 2012 during a residency with the Siobhan Davies Dance Company, for which Carnac had been commissioned to collaborate with dancer and choreographer Laila Diallo. They spent three weeks in Farnham, an ancient town in the south of England that had been a pottery center since Roman times, followed by three weeks in London. The collaboration, “exploring process through movement as a source for performance, improvisation, and composition,” proved so successful it is still going on.¹ The project at hand, “Side by Side,” embodies several principles central to Carnac’s work and life.

Carnac and Diallo begin by each bringing a suitcase full of ideas to the studio. As documented by two videographers, their pace is unhurried, with movements evolving through their individual concentration to a gradual awareness of the other person in the physical space. Film clips found on the project’s interactive website show the artists working in the shared space.² In one, Carnac stands still, while Diallo’s body moves expressively in a white room. In another they create graphic patterns by unspooling rolls of paper of various sizes, ranging from register tape (“till tape” in UK) to shelf paper (about three feet wide and folded for strength), across the studio floor. Although formally trained as a metalsmith, Carnac loves paper, part of her appreciation for the simple, the obvious and overlooked. In the otherwise silent room the paper makes a crinkling noise while the dancer quietly thumps as she moves



around. In “Rolling Out and Coiling In,” the artists appear to coordinate spontaneous movements of paper rolling over the entire floor.³ The movements of both Carnac and Diallo are un-self-conscious and transitory. They’re not preparing for something else but are immersed in the process. Later, watching the film together, they discover connections between their thoughts and processes.

“Side by Side” is an encapsulation of Carnac’s salient themes as a maker: specifically, the importance of movement and possibilities for innovation born of collaboration. The correlation between movement and creativity permeates Carnac’s life and work. In the studio she moves herself and the objects in her environment. Moving things around helps order the world the way you prefer to see it, as well as acting as a prompt to your brain. Carnac believes one must move out of the studio or into another room while working. Like taking a new seat at a familiar table, one’s viewpoint changes.

Outside, Carnac’s method is to walk. There is, of course, a long tradition of walking throughout the British Isles. Carnac walks nearly everywhere; she doesn’t drive. Her preferred pace is slow and deliberate. Through walking she familiarizes herself with the locale, observing, photographing the hidden, the haunting, the beautiful or fleeting moment. The immersive pace helps ease the dislocation that work travel can bring. Walking with another person lets you see what they see, like the simplest form of collaboration.

Because she is so mindful about inhabiting the world, it was perhaps inevitable that Carnac would become engaged with the Slow Movement. Begun in Italy in the 1970s as a protest against the encroachment of McDonald’s business in Europe, the Slow Food movement originally sought to honor and protect indigenous wines and foodstuffs. Gathering momentum in the 1980s and 90s, among other things it valued quality over quantity, and emphasized provenance and locality in production, preparation and consumption of food. It even appropriated the word *artisanal*, highlighting its association with the value of handwork. With its emphasis on sustainability, the Slow Movement quickly spread to include craft and design.

Generally speaking, Slow Design prizes global activism and collaboration. For Carnac, it’s about “work being centered self-consciously on the explicit connection between material, process and maker, with an emphasis on deliberation and reflection.”⁴ Carnac’s personal ethos and methodology found traction in Slow Craft. Her ability to articulate the core values made her a natural for curating and organizing Slow projects, such as “Taking Time: Craft and the Slow Revolution,” a 2007 project for the British Crafts development organization *Craftspace*. The exhibition traveled throughout the UK during 2009–2011 and was augmented by a catalogue and a blog chronicling her many lectures associated with the project, as well as a public forum. For example, Carnac values skill as well as process, and in “Taking Time,” she selected artists whose skills were exemplary. Some chose to explore time itself, as a thread connecting discrete events. Perhaps it needn’t be linear,

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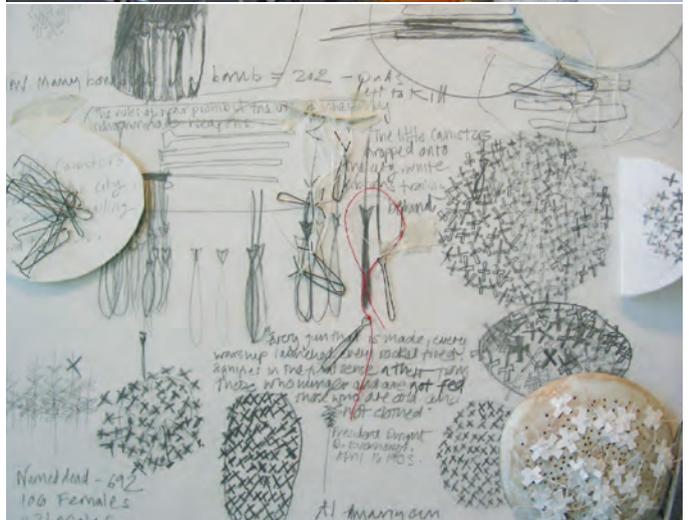
past-present-future, but more like a matrix or web. Such a notion would be consistent with the way Carnac makes connections among people, ideas, events and the physical world.

In “Thinking Process: On Contemporary Jewelry and the Relational Turn,” Carnac’s chapter in the 2013 book *Contemporary Jewelry in Perspective*, she appeals to the Slow Craft movement to help bridge the gap between the solitary jeweler at the bench and the relational, or contextual designer. Her own jewelry is mostly the latter, badgeliike and semiotic. The social context, provenance, design and fabrication all matter equally, as illustrated by displaying her own finely crafted objects with their procedural drawings or materials. Every element gets the same care. Drawings, paper models, idea prompts bristle with embryonic ideas in two and three dimensions. Slow Craft meets design by introducing the possibility of collaboration, or shared inspiration. The flash of creativity isn’t confined to one individual. As Carnac and Diallo have shown, two creative minds might just be better than one.

Carnac welcomes collaboration wherever she finds it. While teaching at Haystack in 2013 she serendipitously met composer and sound artist Pauline Oliveros. Carnac’s class joined Oliveros to experiment with vocal and instrumental sounds, including those made by kitchen stockpots and saucepans. Oliveros then visited the metals studio, where students, improvising with tools they had made during the week, played to the backdrop of scraping files, the ping of a hammer and the rhythmic squeak of a jeweler’s saw. Without prior planning, the sounds and rhythms became synchronized, much like Carnac and Diallo’s movements. Now pared down from the blare of many individuals, participants become more mindful of ordinary studio sounds.⁵

A 2009 collaboration with furniture maker David Gates created Carnac’s display at COLLECT, the International Art Fair for Contemporary Objects in London. Gates describes the process of building the supporting “leg frame of pegged and lapped unfinished oak sections. ...[It] gained its own quiet autonomy in [the] making, leading to something more... than either of us had imagined at the start.”⁶ In another collaboration with Gates, some of her raised silver bowls were installed on wooden bases, as if cairns in a landscape.

Carnac has used film and video successfully in her own work, and as a peripatetic omnivore she searches out esoteric documentation of her many interests. In preparation for “Side by Side,” Carnac and Diallo shared relevant films that relate to gathering, walking and sharing, in which walking becomes an instrumental bridge to other overlooked parts of the world. John Rogers’s 2009 film “The London Perambulator” documents Nik Papadimitriou, a wandering soul who walks through Middlesex (London), collecting images, objects and tales, exposing forgotten



549 Days Between: Drawing Permanence and Place, 2011 (detail)
enamel, paper, graphite, ink, string
installation dimensions variable
PHOTO: HELEN CARNAC

Cluster: Anti War Medals, 2004
paper, graphite, silver, vitreous enamel, thread
10 x 10"
PHOTO: HELEN CARNAC



Vessel, 2003
fine silver, wire
PHOTO: DAVID GATES



Bowl, 2002
silver, thread, paper
PHOTO: HELEN CARNAC



Oil Lamps, 1998
silver, steel
PHOTO: HELEN CARNAC

corners in the modern world.⁷ Stills from the film closely resemble the kinds of poetic “snapshots” Carnac also records from “edgelands.” Through her work, she reclaims such urban landscapes from a dystopian civilization. More than once Carnac and Diallo watched *The Wrecking Season*, a 2004 documentary about beachcombing (“wrecking”) on the eastern north Atlantic. The film’s subject, the late Nick Darke, spent his life collecting detritus such as identification tags from fishing and lobster boats that had washed up on the shores of Cornwall. Darke was able to identify the owners as being fishermen from Canada and the United States and he contacted each one, making a connection across the Atlantic. Carnac was most affected by Darke’s efforts to create a human link to the lost items.

Born in the “ceremonial county” of Cornwall, the southwestern peninsula of England that juts out into the Celtic Sea, Carnac grew up in South East Wales, on the River Wye that divides Wales and England. The lush, picturesque Wye Valley is a place of historic walking, much like the Appalachian Trail in popularity, but its abundant iron and coal, with timber for charcoal, also made it attractive for early industrialization. Therefore scars, remnants of coalfields and small-scale mining from Neolithic times, rend the landscapes. From childhood Carnac was imprinted not only to the rural landscape of her remote town, but to an awareness of boundaries and edges—of the two countries, whose borders she traversed daily, of countryside and industry, of history and modernization. These themes have engaged her all her life, drawing her to ideas at the edges of disciplines and to people who work at the edges of their practice.

Carnac’s wanderings, whether a week in Yorkshire, or five months in Berlin, are of interest all by themselves but they also create a thread, through objects documented or collected, to her enameled bowls. Home is now London, where Carnac loves to return after her frequent travels. The Thames is the heart of the city. Her new studio is right up on the river and now, living south of it, she must cross,

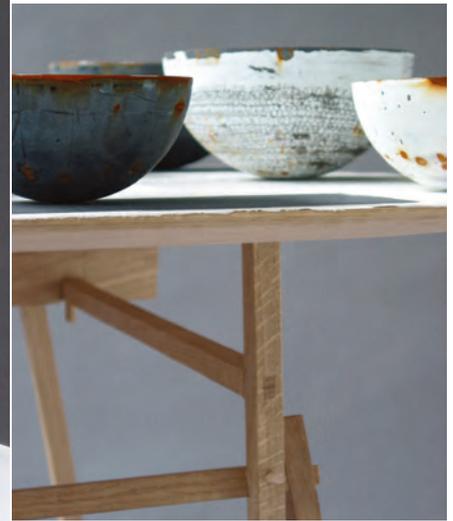
and take note of it, often in her daily life. It is a place of activity, of commerce, the material life of the city. In the 2014 photo series “London wandering in February,” Carnac captures moments, relationships, colors and geometries in the world around her.⁸ There one can see foreshadowing and echoes of mark-making that appears on her bowls and prints. “I’m really interested in the marks humans have left on objects—the trace left.”⁹ In her hands they transcend the “found object” and seem to refer instead to moments of quiet beauty that can be found in the world.

Carnac was introduced to jewelry early in her educational career. She began working in metal at age eleven, took her O levels in jewelry, and showed work in Goldsmith’s Hall at age sixteen. Metal remains the standard against which all materials are judged. She received a classic art and metalsmithing education at London Guildhall University, including a campus exchange to the Fachhochschule fur Gestaltung, Schwabisch Gmund in Germany. Despite this comprehensive foundation it took her some time after graduating to find the one combination of process and material that “felt like IT.”

For ten years after leaving school Carnac worked mainly in copper and silver; she liked hands-on raising and joining as processes and was fond of leaving the marks of her making on the objects. At the time of a 2002 exhibition titled “Diaspora Cymreig” (makers of Welsh origin working outside of Wales) she was known for making copper oil lamps. “These forms influenced a generation of younger

makers but tellingly none of her imitators mastered the technical skills required to make them.”¹⁰ Her epiphany came in 2004 when she was introduced to the unique properties of white liquid enamel on steel. Usually mixed to a pouring

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Each Other, 2009 (details)
vitreous enamel, steel, paper,
graphite, oak
PHOTO: DAVID GATES

consistency, liquid enamel dries to a chalky, plasterlike coating on the metal. After firing, the enamel may be acid etched or abraded by hand or by sandblasting for further surface treatment. Not only is it a beautiful result (Carnac loves the whiteness), but the lengthy process itself is satisfying. Having always enjoyed drawing as a process and metal as material, Carnac drew a tool through the dry, unfired white, leaving the gestural, hand-drawn black line of the bare metal exposed. Hearing the *skritch* of the metal underneath, she knew she'd come home.

In 2009 Carnac was awarded a Cultural Leadership Fellowship through a now-extinct program that involved a six-month placement with an arts organization. Part of the fellowship entailed training as a “relational training coach.” Here was an opportunity to consider leadership-through-practice, sort of leading by example, in a collaborative way, rather than the more common top-down hierarchy.

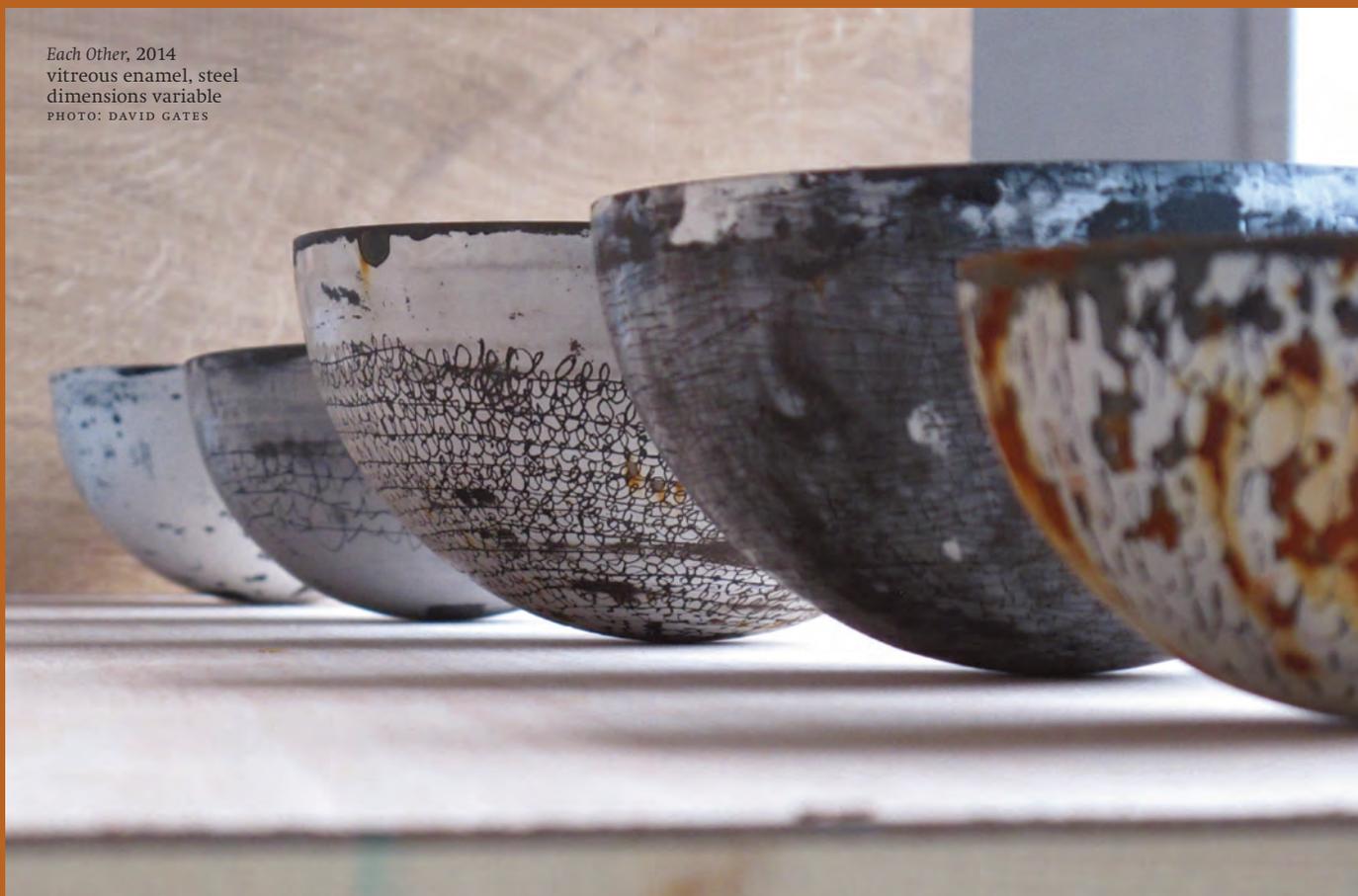
The method can be an unfamiliar dynamic in a studio environment. She facilitates personal discovery within group interaction, so that students are not competing but collaborating, and becoming, almost without realizing it, aware of each others' contributions. She welcomes insights and innovation, and seems to both challenge and reaffirm the instructor's role at the same time. She tries never to be authoritarian but her calm authority is unmistakable.

Carnac's new studio work is enameled. Like most makers, after a time away, she “needs to bleed into my process.” Her many interests—in collaboration, teaching, movement—have meant less time in the studio, where she works quickly and intuitively, resulting in a distilled, abstracted design aesthetic. Since moving into a new studio building where there was an existing print workshop, she's gone back into printmaking, and since the beginning of 2014 she has been etching. In her hands, a print becomes

Helen Carnac in process with an
enamel covered vessel, April 2014
PHOTO: DAVID GATES



Each Other, 2014
vitreous enamel, steel
dimensions variable
PHOTO: DAVID GATES



three-dimensional by curving to form a bowl. She views the bowl not so much a functional container as a vehicle for mark-making, a flat surface wrapped into a hemisphere with interior and exterior. She is now beginning to literally deconstruct the bowls, creating multiple edges where there was one, and referencing the earlier silversmithing in which seams of fabrication would be left visible.

Looking at the work and installation, one is reminded of the many components Carnac has assembled: what she's seen, where she's been, shapes of things and the spaces they leave behind. Carnac's method is, for her, the perfect marriage of material, tool and process. The sound and touch of these materials made enamel her *métier* and pulled her back again. She draws constantly and line is perhaps her most expressive form. The steel bowls are spun for her, leaving her time to concentrate on drawing. The visceral pleasure of drawing on and through the enamel unites the head and the heart, the rational and nonrational. She claims to love the grinding back, always looking to see something in the surface and bringing out something extraordinary out of the ordinary. At the end, the satiny stoned finish of the bowls fairly begs to be handled. And, as Henri Focillon observed long ago, "touch is the very beginning of Creation."¹¹ Formally identical, the bowls are individualized through the drawings that traverse interior and exterior. The drawings are not on the surface as decorations, but inscribed through the enamel to the steel beneath, unifying surface and structure.

The sum of Carnac's work—bowls, badges and flat steel tiles—has an even larger historical context. The searing experience of two world wars left no family untouched in Europe and artists are still exorcising the effects through their work. The rusted and scratched bowls, while ostensibly about object- and mark-making, also carry the trace memories of London pockmarked and shattered during the Blitz. Carnac's quest for moments of grace amid chaos is evident in the juxtaposition of rusted urban detritus and pastoral geometries of plowed fields and rocky beaches. Working back and forth between large movements of her collaboration and now the etching, for example, Carnac might agree with Andy Goldsworthy that "one scale releases energy for the other."¹² It is paradoxical that Carnac has seemed to embrace the past (the Slow Movement) to upend the present (hierarchical leadership model). She's not so much looking back, as evidenced by her skillful use of blogs, posts, social media, and website, but selecting what of the new is worthy of her attention.

At the time of this writing, Carnac is drawing, printmaking, and enameling. She and Diallo are still collaborating. The lengthy and fruitful collaboration has led Carnac to the edge of something as yet undiscovered. She can feel she is in a period of transition. To what, she isn't sure. But unquestionably, movement leads to thinking and thinking to making. So the metaphor of thinking *through* something becomes an actual description of a process. Spiraling around, never quite stepping in the same river twice, she revisits key themes, takes note, and moves forward.



Into and out of the field, 2013
vitreous enamel on steel,
found objects
78 3/4 x 27 1/2"
PHOTO: HELEN CARNAC

Marjorie Simon is a metalsmith and writer residing in Philadelphia.

1. This and all unattributed quotes taken from communication with the artist during 2013-2014.
2. www.siobhandavies.com/sidebyside
3. www.siobhandavies.com/sidebyside/rolling-out-and-coiling-in
4. www.makingaslowrevolution.wordpress.com/contributors
5. The author was a student in Carnac's class at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, summer 2013.
6. www.helencarnac.wordpress.com/each-other
7. www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/9401960.stm
8. www.helencarnac.co.uk
9. www.themaking.org.uk/content/makers/2001/10/helen_carnac.html
10. Sarah Roberts, catalogue essay, *Diaspora Cymreig*. Ruthin Craft Centre, Wales. p. 20.
11. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms*, New York: Zone Books, 1992, p. 167.
12. Andy Goldsworthy: *A Collaboration with Nature*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990.