



Art Works of the Earth

WORDS: LC Littlejohn

PHOTO: Orkney Media Group and courtesy of Jeanne Bouza Rose,

Jeanne Bouza Rose is an American artist who would love to be an Orcadian (or even a Stromnessian) by persuasion and inclination, if not by birth.

And Orkney is just the place to satisfy her passion for archaeology, in a non-professional sense. She has spent every summer over the last few years volunteering at the Ness of Brodgar dig. This resulted in her becoming, for the 2018 dig period, an artist-in-residence.

Following her time there, she mounted an exhibition of her work from the Ness in the Orkney Museum. That show closed early in February this year, but I can tell you that it was fascinating.

In the exhibition *Vanishing Points* there were round canvases (called tondos) which made you feel as if you were looking down a telescope and seeing something discrete in the painting.

But what took the eye most was an enormous oil painting, 15ft by 5ft, with stones, earth, trenches, and carvings (markings, scratchings, incisions, call them what you will) depicted in the most wonderful way. I thought the piece was almost chapel-like and had strange words handwritten all over the bottom of the painting.

But more on that later...

Going backward in time, how did Jeanne come to be an artist-in-residence at the Ness of Brodgar in 2018?

"Well, Nick Card, director of the site, invited me to come. I had been hanging about the Ness volunteering since 2011. Through the winters I helped out in other ways, assisting in the shop, designing t-shirts and so on. Basically putting some colour into the environment."

Was the artist-in-residence a paid post?

"Not this time. I think there was some funding a number of years ago, but it was so nice to be officially invited, funded or not. Nick asked me in 2017, about a year ahead of the next dig, so I could prepare to make it my summer's focus."

In the interim, Jeanne applied for a Visual Arts Award from Creative Scotland (these awards are also supported locally) and was successful in winning a £500 grant for self-development.



"You had to have a project, and mine was the Ness. I worked throughout the winter, renting the Northlight Gallery as a studio; took a Vedic Art workshop at Shorelines Yoga & Art Studios in Finstown; and got some in-depth information from Dr Antonia Thomas, who lectures at the University of the Highlands & Islands in the new Master's programme at Orkney College entitled Art and Archaeology – so there is something connecting the two!"

You funded your own time during the dig period?

"Yes. I considered it a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But I did have some extra resources. I took some of my artwork back to America on holiday and managed to sell everything... so I used that money. Following discussions with another artist at the Ness, Karen Wallis (who also had her work exhibited at the Orkney Museum), we both decided to put our 'extras' towards a Portacabin on the site – our Art Hut."

Jeanne began as soon as the dig opened at the start of July. But this time her eye was in a different place.

"I focused on the art in the dirt and stones rather than just seeing the dirt with the stones. It's what's underneath and around the sides that is interesting. I was always looking down from the top before, but this season Nick introduced me as an artist-in-residence. This encouraged the archaeologists

down in the trench to invite me in to see things. It was as if I had a different uniform. I was able to get differently engaged with folk.

"Nick introduced me to the people on the site, so how could I include people from the site into the Art Hut? By the end I had discovered how to connect with all those people – closing the circle."

...and more of that later too.

"There were also other artists at the Ness. One painter concentrated on people another was working in pottery and another focused on pigment. Everybody had a different focus and used different media."

Jeanne points out that just as 'Art' has many divisions and genres, so has archaeology – micromorphology, photogrammetry, geoarchaeology – it goes on and on. In this, art and archaeology are alike.

"Looking at the site, I would say to myself, what am I going to focus on for a painting? Then I was caught up with this earth splodge thing, with a rainbow of earth colours, which I now know is called a sondage – a test pit or small trench. There were rectangular depressions with interesting shadows pressed into them. I was drawn to do something with their patterns arranged in a rainbow of earth colours."

Then Jeanne enquired of Dr Jo McKenzie (a soil micro-morphologist from Bradford University), what the

depressions were called – since she was making them by taking out blocks of soil. Jo hadn't really paid any attention to the depression left in the sondage after removing her samples. She was just interested in getting her sample out safely and off to the laboratory as soon as possible.

But Jeanne was intrigued by the hollow rectangle left behind in an 'earth rainbow of layers' and therefore asked what the hole was called. Jo said there was no name, it was just a specimen point location and said 'Jeanne, go ahead and create a name for it'. Jeanne took the letters of those three words and called the rectangular gap a SPLadonga.

Jo thinks it is a fine name and Jeanne is working on getting it into the Urban Dictionary. Another first for the Ness, perhaps!

The weeks at the Ness of Brodgar flew past in the wonderful summer weather and Jeanne was creating a painting in oils the full 15-foot length of the Portacabin.

"People hesitated at the doorway of the Art Hut, seeing a very large colourful painting in progress. Visitors to the site would come in, but the workers less so. I kept saying that I was making a 'homage to the sondage in a montage' and I wanted people to see that."

What a wonderful phrase.

"My painting was capturing what



Jeanne with Dr Jo MacKenzie from Bradford University recording finds at the Ness of Brodgar

would be gone next season. Meantime, the bottom part of the canvas was still bare and empty of paint. I wanted to write 'sondage' in that space. Then I asked Christopher Gee if he had any funny words from archaeology to add and he said what about 'loss on ignition'. I asked him to write it in too.

"Now I knew how I could engage the workers on the site.

"And so it started. I invited the visiting archaeologists and students to come join me in the Art Hut and add a favourite archaeological word. Some of them are so weird, like 'gank' – which is the yellow marker where they take their readings from. Other peculiar phrases were caught like 'optically stimulated luminescence' and so on."

This of course was bringing artist and archaeologist together. In a way, it's a reflection of the graffiti on the stones in the Ness. And even perhaps in what was once painted on them.

Jeanne, interested in colour, explains that, in 2010, the archaeologists found painted stones. The following year they found a little area where there was evidence of pigment and stone spatulas, and where colours may have been mixed for application thousands of years ago.

"So, when I set up the exhibition, I put my art tools beside Neolithic stone tools to pose the connections to then and now. Perhaps they used brushes? Who knows?"

"And I asked digital archaeologist on site, Jim Bright, to use his skills from Ness photogrammetry into creating a 3D version of my painting on the same laptop with his 3D and virtual reality of Ness structures – along with previous digital work of Hugo Anderson-Whymark."

Now that the dig is over and her wonderful exhibition is at an end, would there be a follow up?

"Well I've always been interested in the marks on the stones in the Ness site. Before 2018, I was already painting and printing with ideas from my volunteering at the Ness – including the 'butterfly' marks seen on some of the stones. (I was there when they found the stone with these marks – so interesting!)

"These particular incisions seem to be repeated enough and structured enough that I wanted to translate them into art in some way as a part of the picture of the Ness."

Indeed, in Jeanne's shop, I can see these triangular carvings or scratchings from the stones of the Ness in all her work round about.

But Jeanne is painting more of what she has learned at the Ness, transferred into paintings, cards,

postcards, cushions, and wall hangings.

"I know that my 15-foot painting is not going to be very accessible to many people, so I've made smaller copies available for sale. But a scarf or a tie with some image from the Ness is accessible. And seeing archaeology on a scarf may encourage a buyer to know more."

Does she make all these materials on behalf of the Ness?

"Yes. I put them up here in my shop and then donate the money to the Ness, and to the Orkney Archaeology Society that supports all the archaeology on Orkney."

That's very generous of you.

"I'm so grateful to be here, and if I can help the Ness I will, because it has informed my artwork."

There is also a small colourful book of a Renga poem written with Yvonne Gray, which is another collaborative effort from Jeanne's time at the Ness. *Pinholes Through Time* will shortly be available on Amazon and all monies are to be dedicated back to the site where the poem was constructed – at the Ness of Brodgar.

"And people will be supporting the site whenever they buy the booklet," says Jeanne.

More art in archaeology and archaeology in art... ■