

“HOW TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH A ROCK”

ART NEWS NEW ZEALAND



## How to have a relationship with a rock

*Last year Kate Newby won the 2012 Walters Prize. This year she's part way through a six-month residency on a cold, windswept island off the coast of Newfoundland, where she's creating personalised bodies of stones.*

Last week I decided to make a hand-poured concrete puddle in the ground here on Fogo Island, off the northeast coast of Newfoundland on Canada's eastern flank. This is not a new thing for me. For the past few years, I've been making puddles in various grounds in a range of places – often coloring the concrete and inserting rocks that I've made out of clay. When I was thinking about making a puddle here, though, it escaped me that I wasn't going to be able to dig any kind of hole in the ground – it's just too frozen. Today it's  $-12^{\circ}$  but it feels like  $-22^{\circ}$  Celsius. Actually, if you have the right clothing, it's possible to spend hours outside, which is what I did last Monday. In order to make a hole in the ground I first had to build a fire to melt the ground. This was a daylong activity and thankfully the

wind was gentle, so I was in no danger of setting fire to Gertie and Darryl's house next door. After spending four hours burning the fire down to coals, I spent only about four minutes digging a hole. Then I poured yellow/beige/buff concrete into the hole and waited about 24 hours for it to dry. It's certainly not my best work – I can say that quite honestly – but fortunately I seemed to have poured it at the right time of the year on exactly the right day. Monday 14 January was sunny and not too cold; on Tuesday it rained so the puddle filled up with water; on Wednesday it was freezing so the water froze nicely inside the puddle; on Thursday and Friday the ocean in the distance behind the puddle froze over completely, so it made for great photos, and on Saturday and Sunday it snowed.

Opposite page: Tower Studio at sunset, Fogo Island  
Below (from left): Puddle work in progress, January 2013

All photos by Kate Newby except where indicated

Some think Fogo Island was named by Portuguese sailors who thought it looked like a volcanic island in the Cape Verde Islands, off West Africa (*fogo* means "fire" in Portuguese). This island is indeed volcanic, but not in the way those Portuguese sailors believed. The volcanic rock here is about 420 million years old. When you walk up Brimstone Head, which looks like a large, round, lumpy, steep hill in the shape of a curled-up animal, you can clearly see some massive quartz sandstones, overlaid by three distinct coarse mudflow sections that look lumpy and filled up with many little rocks. Some fragments are textured with lots of little cavities, like pumice, but most are pink, fine-grained rhyolite, which looks a bit like cement with many little pebbles and bits in it. What I found most charming about Brimstone Head was seeing pink, glassy banding in a large rock face, which indicates the volcanic ash was very hot, and this hot ash welded like glass as soon as it fell to the ground. The rock face then tilted on a 40-degree angle as the whole island moved over time. What struck me was learning such simple pieces of information; this rock is extremely old; it's on a slope because the whole island has tilted downwards over millions of years; it's still moving; I was able to stand in front of it and touch it.

I also learned recently from local geologist Paul Dean that the reason rocks are so prime for studying here on Fogo Island is because of the ice that comes down from the Arctic, and the pack ice that freezes around the island every winter. The ice breaks up into little sections and combined with tidal movements it acts as a natural abrasive, keeping the rocks clean and making them easy to see. Easy to see if they're not covered in snow and your eyes can see through the icy northwest wind blasting your face and body.



Kate Newby on Fogo Island. Photo: Drew Lichtenstein

Now it's Monday again and the puddle has long disappeared in a bank of fluffy snow. This morning when I was checking it (the puddle is in front of my house right beside the sea), lo and behold, on the frozen Atlantic Ocean behind it was a seal bobbing about in the water. There was no way I could capture that in a photo, but it made for a special event in the life of the puddle. It's in situations like this that I feel the work can be less and that it doesn't have to do as much or over-perform - if you put something out there in conversation with an interesting situation, it manages to tell its own story, often better than you can.

Realistically, where else could this happen - making work with sun, snow and a seal? And that's why I'm here.







Left (from top): Bridge Studio; Long Studio (photos: Bent R. Synnevag); Fishing stage at Tiltling; Fogo Island Inn

Opposite page (top): Tower Studio in winter; (below) Kate Newby's rock works in progress, January 2013

My nearest town, Joe Batt's Arm, is six miles away and is one of seven main towns (outports) on the island, which has a population of 2,300. The community is currently undertaking numerous ventures to revive itself in an attempt to keep on keeping on after the 1992 Cod Moratorium when the Canadian government suspended all fishing in the region because of the cataclysmic collapse of the cod fishery. Part of the island's resuscitation plan is a residency programme called Fogo Island Arts, which currently offers four, soon to be six, artist's studio residencies. The studios, designed by Canadian architect Todd Saunders, are all extremely specific to the surrounding landscape. Squish studio looks a bit like an iceberg out on the rocks. The Bridge studio juts out over a very large pond, and the Tower studio in Shoal Bay, where I am, is three-storeys high and has a ladder inside it – sort of like the inside of a ship, which makes sense because Shoal Bay was where fishing boats were built before the moratorium when the fishery was thriving.

Perhaps because there aren't really any distractions here (apart from the weather), it feels possible to make work and focus on things in a way that hasn't seemed possible before. Perhaps this is because I have only a few friends, am not part of a community and am well rested; each day seems to offer more space for clarity of thought and the chance to think about many things at once in useful ways. It does get annoying having to cook all the time, as there are only two options for eating out – Chester's Fried Chicken up by the gas station in Fogo Island Central and a Chinese restaurant in the town of Fogo that I have yet to try. I'd love to order some food in, or at least be able to walk down the road *on a sidewalk* (no such thing here) to a restaurant that served a fresh salad.

Sometimes the domestic routine is a bit more annoying than I like... getting home only to do the dishes from the night before, attempting to cook something other than pasta, and then trying to stay awake past 8pm – there are no distractions to keep you awake. But, all of these things evidently make for the right working conditions for me, and for a lot of other artists who've come to work here.

A few weeks ago Paul Dean mentioned that the folk on Fogo Island used to heat their beds with rocks. They'd put them around the wood stove to warm up and then use them as a sort of hot water bottle in their beds. It was interesting to talk to Paul and find out more about the social integration of rocks into daily living on the island. Rocks were also used as anchors as not everyone on the island could afford wrought iron anchors. Killicks, as they're called, are rocks held in a sort of wood basket, which can be lowered into the ocean just like an anchor. Also if you walk into just about any house here, you'll see a rock on a windowsill. Shoal Bay, where my home and studio are located, is all on top of granite.



So far the bulk of my work on the island has been making rocks from white stone and porcelain and then firing up the kiln, which is housed in the entrance of an old wooden church across the road from my house. Probably the last thing this island needs is more rocks, so I'm a little uncertain about my ideas here... but I'm thinking that instead of creating bodies of rocks that speak of 'deep time' (the concept that the geologic time scale is vast) and the different regional bodies of rock, I want to create lighter, humanised bodies of stones. Or maybe 'personalised' is a better way to describe them. I plan to give these sets of rocks names I've observed around the island. *Miss Deep Bay*, which is the name of a boat in Deep Bay. *Nicole's*, the best restaurant on the island, and only open in the summer. *Peg's*, which is the name of a bed and breakfast here. *Tina's*, which is the name of the gas station – names and evidence of places and people living remarkable daily lives.

Before I leave the island in March these works will be part of an exhibition (the first) in the Fogo Island Gallery, which has been curated by Nicolaus Schafhausen. He's strategic director of Fogo Island Arts, which administers these residencies, and has recently been appointed artistic director at the Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna.

The Fogo Island Gallery was built as part of the Fogo Island Inn, a luxury hotel complex that includes a cinema, restaurant, library, study and saunas – all of which will be open to locals as well as guests. The inn is owned and run by the islanders as a way to support themselves and to fund the artist's residency programme, a geology residency and other small business ventures.

For more information about artists' residencies on Fogo Island, visit [www.fogoislandarts.ca](http://www.fogoislandarts.ca)

