

# CHOROGRAPHY — MEDIA MATERIALITIES



Gallery – [water pigment paper]

Working on my text accompaniment to the guide to Paul Noble's art work, on display currently at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, has had me reflecting again on just how we might describe an encounter, in this case with a world of the imagination, a curiously enigmatic cosmopolis.

(As an archaeologist I am constantly encountering places, but aren't they all so informed by the imaginary, both personal and cultural?)

While I chose a kind of glossary of an itinerary through Nobson ([In Parenthesis \[Link\]](#)), I have found it so appropriate to look again at the descriptive efforts of the English chorographers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – how curate John Wallis, my favorite, described the county of Northumberland in the 1750s and 60s, its natural history and antiquities, with an attitude and style intimately

human, observant of local detail, and almost alchemical in its appreciation of the qualities of place and the physical environment.

Paul draws in pencil graphite on an epic scale of minute detail, and shared with me one of the figures of his own encounter with Nobson Newtown – Mefisty. Me – fist – Mephistopheles – Mefisty is the product of Paul's pact with graphite, laboring over drawings twenty feet high and as wide – labor that takes its toll on hand and wrist as graphite is manipulated into graphic form [Link].

This intimate engagement with an allotrope of carbon I find quite haunting – resonant too, of course, of all those mythical Promethean encounters with earth and clay.

For many years too I have been fascinated by another encounter with earth, clay and minerals – ceramics. I have documented this, and again the challenge of describing the ineffable, working in and on clay, but, frankly, with only limited success. My books and many papers on ancient Greek ceramics always seemed so wide of the mark – when I was very aware of what went into the design and making. (And now, over the summer, Helen is downstairs in the studio, working on her extraordinary experiments in studio ceramic terra sigillata [Link].)

Add to this some recent reflections, reported in this blog, on form and substance, Aristotelian matters of **hylomorphism**, the way form emerges to make sense (this being another central topic of Paul's Nobson Newtown) [Link]. And how to document, to describe ruin through photography – [Link].

I suggested that we might connect an experience, of encountering a site for example, with an expanded notion of the aesthetic (beyond the typical association of the word with the arts). It is only through situated experience that we encounter things. Thinking, sensing, feeling, evaluating – this is the aesthetic. This is how I understand Kant's transcendental aesthetic – that aesthetic elements are foundational for knowledge: only in space and time, that is through experience and intuition, can objects and places first be given to us [Link].

So I find myself returning to my earliest field experiences in the north east of England and my longest running project of offering a description of the English-Scottish borders from earliest times.



Photography, planning, mapping and other forms of graphical documentation have always been, for me, ways of working through such issues of documentation and description – photo work as much about photographic encounter as about the images produced. Planning and drawing because these direct attention. Attempts *to handle* the qualities of place and material artifact – quiddity and haecceity [Link].

This is less a matter of illustration, and more about the way setting up a photo (viewpoint, composition, color balance, contrast control, printing and surface), making marks (inkjet to technical pencil), manipulating pigment, is part of an encounter, a response perhaps, or a responsibility, even a calling.

Paul's graphite (and now marble and clay and more materials) and Helen's clays and oxides have shifted my attention to *water, pigment, paper* – any encounter with a landscape such as the English-Scottish borders needs to retrace the tracks of Romantic watercolorists.

And watercolor is precisely transparent – revealing every manipulation of pigment

and water on paper.

Accent Arts, a fabulous supply store in Palo Alto, stocks a range of traditional pigment paints (Daniel Smith and Rublev) – remarkable materials, minerals and metal oxides and compounds that behave in very distinctive ways. Far from the definition of color we are so used to on screen (RGB percentages, whatever) or in print (CMYK et al).

### How mark making is a design medium

– the practice defining the object. De-sign. How gesture, hand and instrument (brush, pen), maneuvering pigment in water upon a surface do not deliver representations or illustrations of anything in particular, though they are generated by close attention to both encounter and also the transformation/translation inherent in any kind of account or description.









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