

Review by Lizzie Lloyd

## Roger Ackling *Sun Histories*

28 March – 17 May 2015

Roger Ackling's work demands attention; not a shout-out-loud kind of attention but a measured, slow-growing, seeping attention. 'Sun Histories', the exhibition of his work at Kestle Barton, comprises some twenty small works - a collection of blocks, tangerine crates, driftwood pieces, stakes and garden tools that have each been ribbed with orderly black lines of dots, made by directing the sun's rays through a hand-held magnifying glass. The objects are modest in scale and his technique is unchanging – Ackling worked in this way for over four decades. Each one represents the time and place of its making, the nature of the materials into which the burned lines are inscribed, the age, colour, shape, texture and density of the wood. The lines of creeping black dots reveal blackened under-seams that are parched and cracked, a reminder of the power of the sun. But most striking are the qualities of concentration and absorption that steer Ackling's hand. And that rub off on the viewer. I found myself wanting to take his objects in my hands, to run my finger along their burred lines, to feel the rows of simple, repetitive grooves. His works feel ceremonial. Like totems or amulets that fit into a palm or under an arm, as if quietly touched by something other-worldly.

Ackling's work is teeming with pathways. It calls to mind the words of Paul Celan, a poet whom Ackling himself admired. 'Driven into the terrain' he wrote, 'with the unmistakable track: Grass, written asunder'. That 'unmistakable track' seems to have stayed with Ackling, as if etched in his psyche. Passages of scored lines fill his works, where wood not grass is parted. Ackling's practice is essentially contemplative and the product of many hours, alone in the landscape. His dark furrows feel like well-trodden neural pathways. Or habitual walking routes. Thinking and walking and looking, activities that so often go hand-in-hand, are similarly repetitive and compulsive. They can be expansive, a celebration of the outside world, but they also have a tendency to slip into runnels of introspection. It is a fine line – a line to which Ackling and his near contemporaries and lifelong friends, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, returned again and again.

Ackling is harnessing the big guns here. He galvanises time and light in a direct communication with the sun's energy. His touch is at once surgical in its precision, obsessive and detached. He facilitates action, guiding rather than driving it. His work embodies the necessarily slow timeframe of its making. And his materials — found, not made; weathered by the elements, not sculpted; and patiently marked by the sun — are slight in size and softly spoken, yet substantial in their poetic and conceptual range. Like the rings of a tree trunk, they evoke the time of their making in physical traces.

Ackling's work has been likened to the photographic process by his wife, Sylvia Ackling, an extract from whose writing provides the supporting text for the show. It is 'photographic in the truest sense' she said. Each dotted line is a sequence of moments, traced by the earth's movement around the sun and the trajectory of its rays. But we can take that premise a step further. If we see Ackling as a conduit, drawing subtle yet holistic relations between art, life, landscape and the elements, his work starts to converge with that of land artists like Long and Fulton. Where they traced the invisible lines

Review by Lizzie Lloyd

## Roger Ackling *Sun Histories*

28 March – 17 May 2015

of their walking through a landscape, Ackling's work depends on a direct and responsive bodily alignment and relationship to the sun, at a given time, in a given place. It results in hand-held maps or sculptural visualisations of here or there, now and then and maybe tomorrow.

With their emphasis on the smallness of human activity in relation to the universe at large, Ackling's works have a lingering melancholy. But there is humour too. The human eccentricity at the heart of his obsessive communing with the sun is clear in his family of garden tools: a hand fork, the handles of a bucket and three paint brushes, the inside of a crate and a pair of rusty garden shears (both hung askew). All these once lost or discarded objects are now salvaged and venerated.

'Sun Histories' keys into a recent renewal of interest in Ackling's work. An exhibition of his last works is running concurrently at Annely Juda and there are plans for a book about his work and teaching.

The exhibition at Kestle Barton reflects the restrained simplicity of his ideas, rigorous and undiluted. Transferring his work from the flatlands of Norfolk — where Ackling made many of these works — to the jagged wilds of Cornwall is an interesting move. But his work holds steady, like deep and meditative intakes of breath amidst buffeting Atlantic currents.

Lizzie Lloyd, 2015