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Title	Ford
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/56952/
DOI	10.48619/bbds.v6i2.A1122
Date	2025
Citation	Poole, Kathryn (2025) Ford. Black Book Drawing and Sketching BBDS - Scientific Journal, 6 (2). pp. 8-21.
Creators	Poole, Kathryn

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
10.48619/bbds.v6i2.A1122

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Ford

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Abstract

Ford – Choosing to Notice.

Ford is an attempt to record every organism that grows on a grave. I use a combination of observational drawing with quadrat data collection to direct the viewers eye to what I want them to notice in the form of a four-panel etching. The grave itself is a family plot in Ford Roman Catholic Cemetery, Bootle. While drawing I try to take notice of each leaf, distinguishing each organism as unique but interconnected. Acknowledging the smallest details and lifeforms as worthy of attention. Noticing these details is a choice, every mark I record is a choice.

Keywords

etching; observational drawing; ritual; printmaking; drawing; burial.

Introduction – Recording, drawing, noticing.

'Ford' is a four-panel etching of a family grave located in Ford Roman Catholic Cemetery created over the span of 2 years. 'Ford' is part of a larger project that looks at 3 family graves, each grave having a different community, each requiring a different response. This grave is a simple grass plot without a headstone or a marker amongst numerous other unmarked graves. The location of the grave was easy to remember within the first year after the last internment, but as time passed, the grass grew, and the vestiges of the cut marks vanished, the plot became indistinguishable from the others. We must use the headstones of others to try to find it.

Enter through the main gate. Turn left. Turn left again. Stop at the grave of Richard O'Hanlon. Walk along the row until the headstones end. Wander until you find the other O'Hanlon. He's nearby. Is it this plot?

Fig 1.

I had never considered the importance of a marker until these later visits. There is a second loss that comes with the loss of a grave, and this is the second grave we have lost. There are 2 sister graves to this one, in another cemetery. The sisters are only buried a few rows apart, but one has a headstone and a rose, the other is again unmarked. We visit the graves on important dates but neither my parents nor myself can remember where Rosie is, so we visit several unmarked plots in the hope of some recognition. Did she back onto another grave or was she in an empty space? I don't remember her being so close to that tree, but it's been 30 years, 40cm of growth a year. ¹(Trust, 2025) It is taking a conscious effort to know the Ford plot so that it is not completely lost.

My drawing practise is always tied up in the idea of attention and noticing and the implication of care that both those words hold. To know and learn through drawing. I created a series of intimate paintings of overlooked flowers

I found on my walks during lockdown in 2020. I made so many of these little paintings with no intention other than looking, but as I looked and learned about each plant, I began to care, first about the plants and then about the area and habitats they grew in. The plants would be classed as weeds or wildflowers, the areas they grew were the sides of gardens, cemetery and railway walls, unplanned plants. But through this project, and because of this active looking, I would look forward to what I would find and how the community of plants would develop with every walk.

Fig 2.

Every project I work on is fuelled by this desire to learn through observing. Mary Oliver remarked that "Attention is the beginning of devotion" ² (Oliver, 2016). I began to think of ways I could record, recognize and memorialize all three graves. The nature of the community of each grave led my response. Ford needed to be an etching. Etching is a chemical printmaking process where you apply a layer of chemical resistant wax to a metal plate. You inscribe your drawing through this wax, revealing the metal underneath. The etching bath cuts into the exposed metal, removing metal only where you have drawn. You are now able to rub ink into these grooves creating multiple prints from one plate. ³ (Adams et al, 2024) Each panel of 'Ford' is an individually etched plate. The plate preparation process mimics the preparation of a body for burial. Both the metal and the body are cleaned as the first step the soil and the plate are cut making space for the body and the ink.

Fig 3.

Communion, Community and Continuity

There is a temporal nature to the process and the creation of the image. Each one of my plates took roughly 275 hours to draw. I now live quite a distance from Ford cemetery and so for this process I drew from a photograph. Because I have drawn from a photograph I am drawing a moment of which I was the only witness and sharing that singular moment. I grid the plates and draw them in sections, some days I would only manage an hour or 2 after work, on the weekends I could dedicate the day and draw an entire strip. The pace of the drawing and the time spent observing the

grass every day changed how I viewed the subject. I was living with the grave, the ritual observances becoming a part of my everyday routine.

Drawing the plates allows time for thought beyond what I observe visually, and I have begun recontextualising the idea of observances and nightly prayer that I was taught as a child. In Catholic belief prayers for the dead and living is a Spiritual Act of Mercy, and the masses and prayers are said to ease their passage through purgatory, shortening the time they spend there.⁴ (Kosloski, 2016) There is also a practical aspect to this as the memory of the deceased remains present in the members of the Church who pray for them. They do not truly die until their memory is unspoken. My goal is to preserve the memory of those within the Ford plot as I draw, and that memory is preserved again with every viewer.

Fig 4.

Instead of a verbal prayer I was creating a visual one. Attentive looking is a form of communication. Drawing is a dialogue with the subject. Similarly, prayer is not passive, you meditate on the spiritual concerns you have. The prints are a communion between the living and the dead, and a form of remembering through storytelling without words. 'Ford' is a communion with the life that is sustained by the grave.

Five bodies reside within the Ford plot, but countless others are sustained by them. 'An ecological community is a group of actually or potentially interacting species living in the same location. Communities are bound together by a shared environment and a network of influence each species has on the other.'⁵ (Nielson, 2014) The grasses, plantains, mosses and countless other species are sustained and flourish because of the death that has occurred. The question is raised of where the body starts and ends. How much of the life that was present in the corpse is transferred to the life that grows from it?

Fig 5.

4. Tables

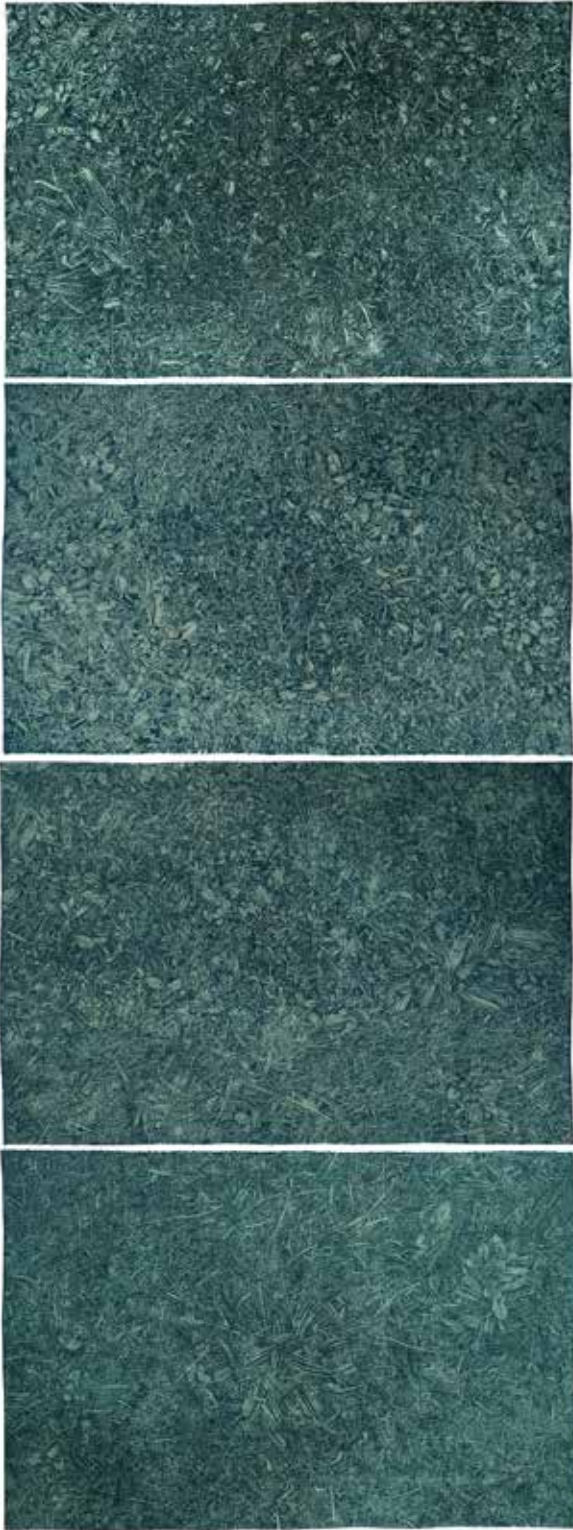


Figure 1. Ford, 60x160cm, 4 panel etching, 2023.



Figure 2. Ivy Leaved Toadflax, 21x15cm, watercolour, 2020.





Figure 3. Ford panel I, 40x60cm, Etching, 2021





Figure 4. Ford panel II, 40x60cm, Etching, 2022





Figure 5. Ford panel III, 40x60cm, Etching, 2023





Figure 6. Ford panel IV, 40x60cm, Etching, 2023

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Conflict of Interests and ethics

"The author(s) declare no conflict of interests. The author(s) also declare full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects' anonymity and/ or consent to publish."

Acknowledgements

My project is funded by Institute of Creativity, Communities and Culture (ICCC) at the University of Lancashire (formally the University of Central Lancashire)

