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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Diamond on Unsplash.

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REFLECTING ON BRACKISH WATERS

By Louise Ritchie

Deep luminous greens and murky ochre hues colour the brackish threshold that fluctuates and pools between the mouth of the Dichty, where it tacitly and without fanfare joins the River Tay in Monifeith. The Dichty Water^[1] was used historically as a source of power for the mill buildings at Claverhouse Bleachworks near Dundee,^[2] where its banks also provided the site for bleaching newly woven cloth. Brackish water is neither salt nor fresh, but sits in the

loose boundaries between estuaries and their conjoining waters. Where is that moment when fresh turns to salt and salt to fresh?

I arrive at my favorite Dichty-from-the-bridge viewpoint to gaze down at the water. The waters flow steadily across the rocks toward the mouth of the Dichty, opening out gently from the last angle bend of the river as it slides under Bridge ECN3 090/208-Underbridge. Named, poetically,



Detail from Louise Ritchie, 'Litmus 6-9 Green.' 2021; brackish litmus paper strips.
Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.



Fig. 1, Louise Ritchie, 'Litmus 6-9 Green.' 2021; brackish litmus paper strips.
Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.

after the space under the bridge. There it widens, and catches on the stones and rocks, picking up a little speed before skimming into the Tay. It has come a long way. Here it transforms from fresh to brackish to salt, the threshold that sits in the *not-fresh*, but *not-salt* state between here and the sea.

This place is shy. No triumphant roar of raging spume from a waterfall or crashing of waves. Just a trickle over the stones on its way. As the waters glide under the bridge carrying the footpath, I peer down at it from above. I watch its shape continually alter, gazing deeply, Narcissus-like, into the deep greens and custardy ochres under

its glossy mirror sheen that undulates under the surface tension as the current carries it along.

I think of the word “carrying.” It suggests weight or moving something that is immobile, but really, tidal currents are combined forces that move water from location to location, regular in pattern, and strongest near the coastal shores and estuaries. The waters are driven by winds near the surface, internal temperature, and salt densities, and from high above, by the moon. Powerful effects from afar, from near, and from within that move these immense bodies of liquid in a constant state of flux. Maybe not carries then; maybe the waters are ushered, firmly,



Fig. 2, ‘Underbridge.’ Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.



Fig. 3, ‘Underbridge Slanty Bricks.’ Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.

elementally but reverentially throughout their journey. Continuous flow, shape-shifting pockets of almost stillness and fluctuating water, skipping to greet the sea like a child let loose on a beach trip. What did it see, I wonder, on its journey?

The water bears a temporal witness to the riverbanks, the wildlife and human-life, activities reflected fleetingly in its moving mirror. I also wonder, as I look down, if I dropped a twig at the Dichty's source 20 miles away in the Sidlaw Hills in Dundee, how long would it take to journey to this point?

I daydream about being the twig basking on the water, being carried along, whipping around the bends and up and over dips in the river's course, like a surface water sightseeing trip, drifting for days, or weeks, or even months.

I move down the sandy steps to the shore. I am level with the water now. I taste it. It tastes strange, as if it doesn't have an actual taste, but the sense of a taste. A taste that has no other description. Yet. To the right, fresh; to the left, salt; in the middle, brackish. Right, left, middle. Placing of taste in position. Brackish, a litmus test of 6-9: green. Not a precisely defined condition: liminal. I hear Derek Jarman reminding me of Kandinsky's assertion that "absolute green is represented by the placid middle notes of a violin."^[3] Placing of sound and colour in position. Sometimes brackish is used to describe a person. Harsh or unpleasant. Unpalatable. But this brackish water is velvety to touch, and it has power. I can feel it.

I hear the water's voice echo in the underbridge with its slanted bricks, patinated with neon-green moss and algae and rusty residues bleeding from the old metal. The water is shadowy today. Storms and heavy rains have disturbed the slumbering silt, clouding the water and modulating its colour from emerald to gloomier green.

I wonder what it would feel like to submerge myself. Cold, probably; wet, absolutely. I imagine moving through the flow with watery veils caressing me as we inch toward the Tay, beyond to the North Sea, and beyond again to Scandinavia, weaving our way further to the Baltic, the largest brackish inland sea in our world.

This indeterminate place, where fresh becomes salt, feels electric. Is it possible that a change in its salty density also alters the air above it? I decide that it must and make a mental note to check. I probably won't, though, preferring to leave that to my own imagination rather than spoil it with facts. My experience—my facts.^[4]

In this reverie-state, I fantasize mixing jewel-like watercolours to match the green I see, adding a little Hooker's green, a tiny touch of sap green. Green, the colour metaphor for envy, sickness but also youthfulness, verdancy; green has many connotations. As a pigment, green is difficult to make. Historically, prepared from organic substances, green is hard to keep stable; green hues can be more fleeting than the metaphors they inspire. As a paint, green is challenging, hard to orchestrate tonally, and pictorially dominant. It oscillates between the yellow and blue primaries.

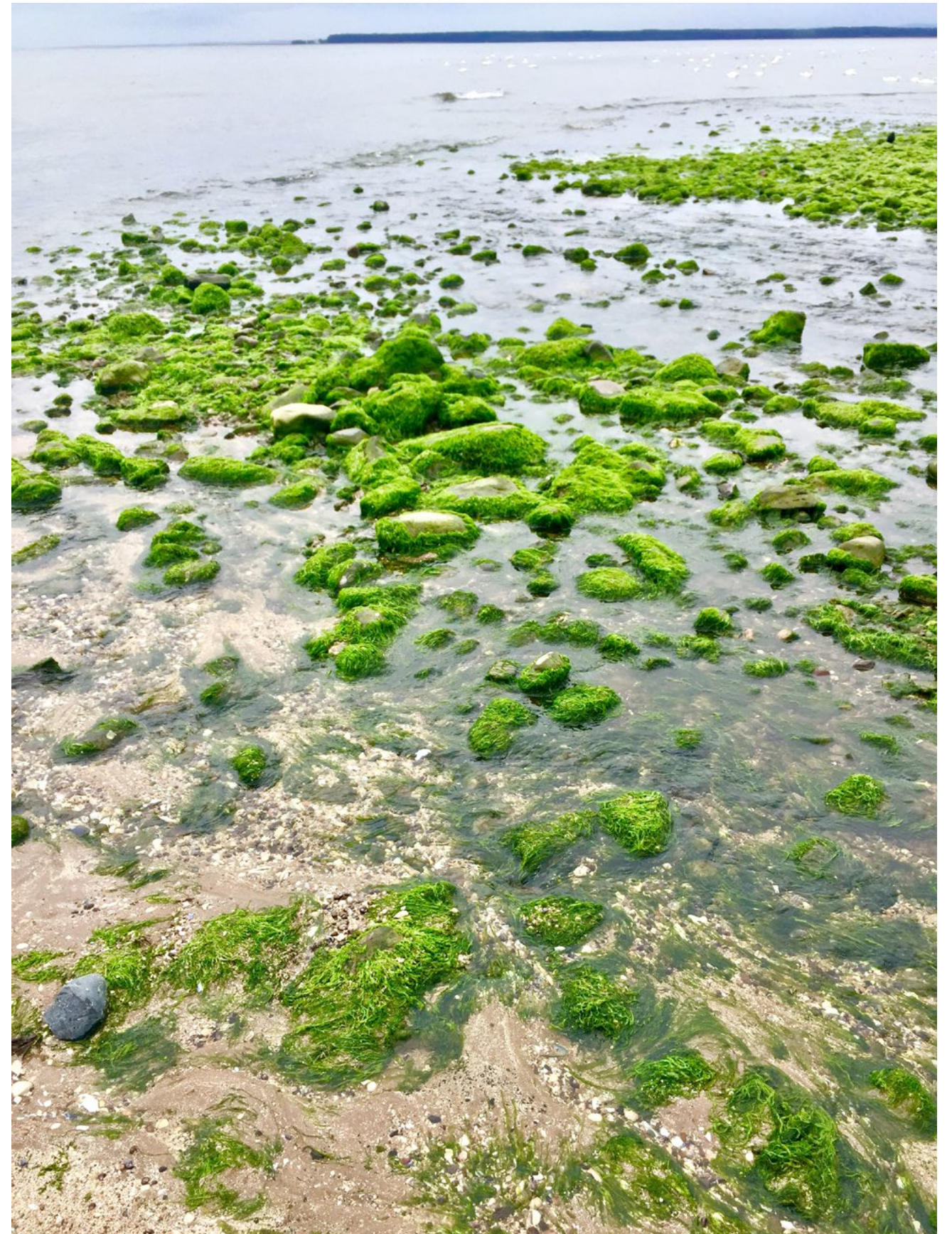


Fig. 4, 'Where Dichty Meets the Sea.' Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.

A threshold-colour. My mind drifts into a fabulous tonal realm gifted with more than three oscillating primary colours and also considers what a greenless world would look like.

The Hooker's green I push around on my imaginary palette and watch swirl off the brush in my glass water beaker was formed in the early nineteenth century by illustrator William Hooker. Hooker mixed the intense Prussian blue with the luxurious gamboge made from resin from Asian evergreens. A threshold-colour, named after its maker like the bridge named after its place.

My dream-green needs a little yellow ochre, a tiny drop of earthy raw umber, deepened with

Payne's grey—that beguiling blue-grey-black—to transpose the hue into today's murkier tone. I contemplate the delicious blue-green of verdigris which forms when copper, brass, or bronze is exposed to air or seawater through time. I think about that for some time, visualizing the dream-water dressed in it. The flow of the dream-water dilutes the paint, echoing the flow of the Dichty waters as they dilute the salty sea. As I scoop up the actual water in my hands, I imagine holding the dream-water. My vessel hands cannot hold the water; it escapes leaving a silky trace. My dream-vessel is able to hold the green for a moment longer, no more than a blink, but it leaves behind a silky verdigris touch.



Fig. 5, 'Dichty Algae and Rust.' Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.

Returning from my reverie, the sea seems urgent now as it moves upriver. The water dances and spins around the rocks and seaweed as it trickles, sloshes, bubbles, gurgles—words that sound of their action. A flock of swans has settled on the edge of the shore and watches expectantly. So, too, does a melodic song thrush, a watchful crow, and a small dog, one of many dogs in fact that seem to agree with me that this unassuming place and its humble aesthetic is special in some felt, but unseen way.

We—the swans, the birds, the dogs and I—watch as the salty tide inundates the fresh waters and

sense a tangible change in the air. Is this also where the brackish threshold exists? In the water's air when salt urges fresh upstream to linger until the tide slackens before retreating to opposite shores?

The moment has passed. The swans and friends depart and I make my way back up the sandy steps to the footpath and stare down at the green water, reflecting on this material shift. Reflecting: a water term aptly describing the ebb and flow between my dream-states, my threshold-states. [5] Not fresh, not salt; brackish.



Fig. 6, Louise Ritchie, 'Of Dreams,' 2021; raw silk, brackish water, verdigris patina, copper powder, acrylic and thread, Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.

Footnotes

[1] Also recorded as the Dighty Burn.

[2] Dundee is a coastal city on the Firth of Tay estuary on the east coast of Scotland.

[3] Derek Jarman, *Chroma: A Book of Colour—June '93* (London: Vintage Classics, 2019), 50.

[4] “My” experience, a claim I make not in selfish disregard of others, but of the artists’ empirical claim of knowing through one’s own embodied sensations. It is the first knowledge, come through the body, before it can be expressed and shared with others, through language, artwork, dance and poetry.

[5] Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas, TX: The Pegasus Foundation, 1999), 9.

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About the Author

Louise Ritchie explores the hybridity and materiality of objects, the complex making processes and concepts employed by artists in the production of artworks within contemporary art practice. Louise researches the artistic compulsion to exploit materialities through reflexive making to bring attention to the fundamental nature of the artistic-compulsion; the itch that must be scratched when working with materials to signify, examine, and record the world we experience. Louise is a B.A. (Honours) fine art and M.F.A. in art and humanities graduate of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design (DJCAD), University of Dundee. She is a Lecturer on the B.A. (Honours) Contemporary Art Practice Degree Programme at City of Glasgow College/University of the West of Scotland. Louise is also a past president of the Society of Scottish Artists, and is currently undertaking a practice-led Ph.D. at DJCAD. Website: www.louiseritchie.com, Instagram: [@louiseritchiegram](https://www.instagram.com/louiseritchiegram).