



# A world-class line-up

**Groundwork** | From dance and installation to film and nocturnal kayaking, a season of contemporary art comes to Cornwall. *Rachel Spence* reports

Midnight on a Cornish creek, and my world has shrunk to the lap of water against hull and oar, the purr of wind through trees in midsummer leaf. All I can see is an arc of star-dusted sky and a pearl-bright moon flashing its cryptic semaphore through a lacy maze of branches. If I wriggle myself up from my supine position, a rim of coastline glides past in a slideshow of velvet-black rooftops and splashes of lamplight.

If you prow the global map of contemporary art for long enough, you wash up in some strange outposts – a building site in Hong Kong, an art fair on a Miami beach – but nocturnal kayaking in the depths of England’s West Country definitely raised the bar.

However, unlike some other misadventures, this one is indisputably worth going out of one’s way for. The handmade wooden vessel is a bona fide artwork titled “Ghost” and piloted – expertly so – by its creator, the Kent-based practitioner Adam Chodzko.

Behind the construction of “Ghost”, which has been adapted to allow the passenger to lie down in the front of the boat while Chodzko paddles, is the artist’s desire to give his guests a “mythological encounter with another world”.

Chodzko requests silence to give the experience the quality of a meditation, yet his wordless presence behind me binds us into a temporary intimacy, while the croon of his paddle intensifies my feeling of passivity. That state of surrender, rare in our performance-fixated age, probably lay behind one of the deepest sleeps of my adult life – and meant that I awoke, just hours later, feeling buoyant.

Over the next couple of days, neither high spirits nor the sensation of being suspended between land and water ever wavered as I toured the other artworks that stitch together the current chapter of Groundwork.

Described by founder and curator Teresa Gleadowe as “a season of contemporary international art in Cornwall”, Groundwork unfolds across the south of the county from May to September in a rolling exhibition programme that encompasses events, performances and artworks.

Given Cornwall’s distance from major metropolises and its reputation as a worthy but now bygone hub for English modernism (in the 20th century, a thriving arts community circled around painters and sculptors such as Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and, later, Roger Hilton and Patrick Heron), Gleadowe faced no small challenge to attract artists of an international contemporary calibre.

However, with a career that included developing and directing the UK’s first MA in curating at the Royal College of Art, Gleadowe commands respect independent of her identity as the wife of Sir Nicholas Serota, who resigned as director of Tate museums in 2017, after a 29-year tenure.

With ties to Cornwall that go back to childhood holidays, for the last three years Gleadowe has been based in Helston, a town on the northern side of the Lizard peninsula.

Here, as well as running international conventions on contemporary art, in 2012, she established Cast (the Cornu-

**A ‘light footprint’ is needed, given the acute imbalance of numbers between tourists and residents**

bian Arts and Science Trust), whose headquarters are in a former school that Gleadowe bought with private funds. In part thanks to EU grants that allowed the creation of artists’ studios, it is steadily becoming a crucible of the county’s small but vital contemporary scene, with studios rented out to artists, film screenings, talks, readings, workshops and activities for families.

Groundwork, funded primarily through a £500,000 grant from Arts Council England – made before Nicholas Serota took up his current role as chairman – is Cast’s first foray into heavyweight exhibition-making. Gleadowe had long wished to create an event with global reach, which has meant a scarcity of artists with Cornish roots on the main programme – a brave but possibly misguided strategy, given how fiercely local audiences cleave to their own. In her defence, Gleadowe points to “field trips and one-off events” with Cornish practitioners, such as September’s collaboration between St Ives-based artist Naomi Frears and DJ Luke Vibert, who grew up in Cornwall.

Gleadowe is also sensitive to the need for “a light footprint”, as she puts it, in a region where the acute imbalance of numbers between tourists and residents cranks up tensions from early June through to the autumn. Aware that planting a thumping sculpture on a Poldark-pretty headland was not the way forward, she focused instead on moving image, sound and



From top: Steve McQueen’s video ‘Gravesend’ (2007); Sean Lynch’s video ‘Latoon’; Manon de Boer’s video ‘Bella, Maia and Nick (From nothing to something to something else, Part I)’  
Cornubian Arts and Science Trust; Steve Tanner

performance. An ongoing programme of artist-led field trips and educational activities for local schools and colleges should also embed the event further into the territory.

Gleadowe knew her approach had paid off when she attracted, in the first tranche of arrivals, crowd-pullers such as film-makers Tacita Dean and Steve McQueen – whose audio-visual specialist advised on the design of a state-of-the-art projection space in Cast’s HQ.

By the time I arrived in late June, the screening room was hosting “The Silence of Ani”, a 2015 film by Belgian-born Francis Alÿs, whose work has graced both Tate and MoMA.

Shot among the medieval ruins on Armenia’s mountainous border with Turkey, it tracks the bittersweet hide-and-seek play of children calling to each other with duduks (traditional double-reed flutes) as they hide behind wind-blasted old stones. The film is transparent in its efforts to elegise our difficulties in reaching out to each other. Yet Alÿs’ lingering, tender cinematography highlights our frailties with a visual compassion that transcends cliché.

The whistles’ tentative, abstract hoots also set the tone for less familiar practitioners. Sound art – too often a synonym for aimless, nerve-rattling noises – makes a convincing case in Groundwork for recognition as a serious medium. We see it at its most condensed in “Forty Part Motet” (2001), Janet Cardiff’s 40-speaker installation of a choral work by

Thomas Tallis, which is installed in a former Wesleyan Chapel in Penzance. The piece lulls listeners into a somnolent ecstasy through a melange of male voices individually recorded to add gritty, seductive dissonance to the contemplative 16th-century harmonies.

Equally off-piste was the decision by Dutch video artist Manon De Boer, in her film “Bella, Maia and Nick (From nothing to something to something else, Part I)” (2018), to leave three teenage music students from Helston Community College to hang out in a seaview studio in St Ives. The blend of concentration, boredom and mischief with which they play, swap and sometimes abandon their instruments is underscored with a precious stratum of adolescent vulnerability by the roar of storm-torn waves beyond the window.

Human communication is treated ostensibly with a more forensic approach by the American research-based artist Steve Rowell. His photographic installation “Points of Presence” (2013) investigates the telegraph cables that once physically joined Land’s End in Cornwall to Newfoundland, and whose corpses now share the seabed with today’s fibre-optic network. Yet Rowell’s images of salt-stained, wire-sprouting, obsolete fragments provoke nearly as much pathos as De Boer’s musicians.

Located in the eccentric, timeless shrine to telecommunications that is the Telegraph Museum in Porthcurno, Rowell’s project encapsulates the synergy between site and artwork that stamps Groundwork’s installations.

Nowhere was this truer than on Par Beach, where choreographer Rosemary Lee staged “Passage for Par” (2018), a contemporary dance work made for the location. A lip of sand wedged between the fume-wreathed cylinders of a working china clay factory and the ivy-dark slopes of Gribbin Head, the lizard-green shoreline glitters thanks to its natural quota of quartz and mica.

Here, as the tide turned under a brûlée-rich sunset, Lee’s performers – 30 women dressed in dark navy, their arms interlinked – moved across the reptilian pelt with tiny, impeccable gestures that married minimalism to folk dancing. For two hours, the audience, who ranged from art students to picnicking families, remained mesmerised by the collective display of inner and outer unity – not a foot could falter or all would collapse like dominoes. Lee’s only injunction to viewers was to stay at a distance as the troupe’s fluid calligraphies were best appreciated from afar.

She could not, however, control two horse-riders who wished to cavort among the breakers. Fortunately they kept their boundaries. Furthermore, those equine bodies, with their elemental fusion of softness and strength, made for a luminous, humbling contrast with the dancers’ fragile forms.

Groundwork’s willingness to risk weaving its story out of the transitory, traceless and unexpected makes it a valuable new strand in the fabric of our cultural world.

*groundwork.art*

Main image: ‘Passage for Par’, a contemporary dance work by Rosemary Lee, staged on Cornwall’s Par Beach as part of the Groundwork festival

Below: Sean Lynch’s video ‘What Is An Apparatus?’

Bottom: Adam Chodzko takes a passenger on his kayak ‘Ghost’  
Cornubian Arts and Science Trust

