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### SENSING THE PAST: AN EXPLORATION OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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PORTFOLIO

# SENSING THE PAST: AN EXPLORATION OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

BELAS KNAP LONG BARROW, ENGLAND

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Elizabeth Poraj-Wilczynska was born in England in 1965. She is an experimental visual artist and archaeological illustrator specialising in reconstruction drawings for professional archaeological publications. She is also an art tutor and therapist.

She has co-authored several academic papers on the subject of art and archaeology and 'Spirit of place'.

Her most recent work, 'Art and Archaeology of Belas Knap,' exhibited at the Corinium Museum (Cirencester, England) earlier this year. Elizabeth has an artistic approach to archaeology and heritage. Using her art as a bridge to engage with people and to promote health and wellbeing.

# SENSING THE PAST: AN EXPLORATION OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

## BELAS KNAP LONG BARROW, ENGLAND

### Keywords

art  
Neolithic  
long barrow  
archaeology  
memory  
sense of place

This portfolio deals with the work I have been undertaking for the past 20 years. Investigating sense of place at Belas Knap Neolithic long barrow, Cotswolds, England.

I have taken an holistic approach in the creation of art that aims to bridge the sensory experience of archaeology, memory and culture.

Over the last twenty years I have been responding through my art to place and memory, mapping, interpreting and connecting to the seasonal changes at Belas Knap, a laterally chambered Neolithic long barrow located in the Cotswold Hills, Gloucestershire, South West England (NGR: SP0209 2554).



**Figure 1.**  
Belas Knap long barrow  
England, 2022  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
Poraj-Wilczynska





**Figure 2.**

Belas Knap, England, 2021  
False Portal with  
straw offering  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
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My earliest memory of Belas Knap is not an image; I simply knew its name. When I was growing up, my family lived in Cheltenham eight miles from Belas Knap. My elder brothers would often cycle to the burial mound and when they came home, I heard them talking to my parents about the fossils they found there. Being too young to join them on their adventures it became for me a mythical place, one that I imagined to be dark and earthy, where magic happened. This mental image endured until I made my first visit.

I was 17 when I made this 'pilgrimage'. Up a steep slope through an atmospheric wood along a tree lined ridge and then suddenly it was before me. I was not disappointed.

Belas Knap is a large ancient monument, 55 metres in length and about 4 metres high. At one end, open to landscape, is a forecourt. Edged by dry stone walls, this space funnels the visitor towards an impressive false portal that guards one end of the mound. There are three other chambers cut into its sides, each entrance a boundary between the outside world and the Neolithic interior. In each of the chamber's megaliths embedded with fossils line the walls.



**Figure 3.**

'The Mothers'  
Fossils found next to  
Belas Knap, 2022  
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In the half-light the cracks and holes in their surface transcend rational thought providing access to the spirit world. The fourth chamber, located diagrammatically opposite to the false portal at the other end, is like a fresh cut grave that entices you to shelter and connect to the mound. On my first visit I did not have a camera, but I did sing a song, a tune of the place that would return to me some twenty years later to inspire the soundscape for an exhibition.

**Figure 4. (left)**  
Belas Knap, England, 2021  
Morning Sun, East Chamber  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
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**Figure 5. (right)**  
Belas Knap, England, 2021,  
Winter Sun, West Chamber  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
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Over the years I have made hundreds, maybe thousands of images of Belas Knap, but somehow, they are never enough to tell its story. I have experimented with film, still images, sound and writing and have just completed a project called, 'The Shimmer'.

**Figure 6.**  
'The Shimmer'  
Belas Knap,  
East Chamber, 2021  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
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It is a film made in collaboration with Richard Suckling at Cave Bear Films.

Shot on a Canon C100 cinema camera it has taken two years to produce. It records light phenomena that occur in the chambers on the wooded east side of the barrow.

As the sun rises golden orbs of light dance across the stone surfaces of the chambers, settling for a short time on the back stone.

This light show mesmerises and delights the senses. Its intensity and character changes with the seasons, from bright gold in spring to rich and orange in winter. A fleeting spectacle, no doubt witnessed by prehistoric man, it connects past and present.

**Figure 7.**  
Screenshot from  
'The Shimmer' film,  
Belas Knap, East Chamber  
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In search of this connection, I have spent many nights sleeping in the barrow, where there is only me, the barrow and the darkness. My recordings on these occasions capture a deep and sometimes frightening soundscape.

On the east side, in the dark chamber that faces Humblebee wood, a dangerous place where trees claw into the hillside, the winds that blow around the barrow converge in a deafening roar. Listening from within this confined space one could easily imagine that the sound is the voice of a huge animal roaming the land.

**Figure 8.** Belas Knap, England, Humblebee Wood  
(Digital Image), © 2022 Elizabeth Poraj-Wilczynska





Recently, I have continued exploring ways to engage with the memory of place by using materials found at the site to create art works. Ground up stone, mud and natural plant pigments are used to make earth maps and representations of the mound.

I also collect soil from various locations around the mound to make pots and 'homes' for the wheat and flint that I have found nearby. Most of the time I feel as if I am working from a memory that is not mine but embedded in the place itself. The more I let go into this feeling, the more prolific and potentially profound my artistic output becomes.

**Figure 9.**  
Belas Knap Sky Map,  
earth and natural pigments on cotton,  
size: 40" x 30"  
© 2022 Elizabeth Poraj-Wilczynska



**Figure 10.**  
'Vessels', homes for flint and wheat, sun baked earth  
© 2022 Elizabeth Poraj-Wilczynska



**Figure 11.**  
'Burial Pot' for flint waste  
flakes, sun baked earth  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
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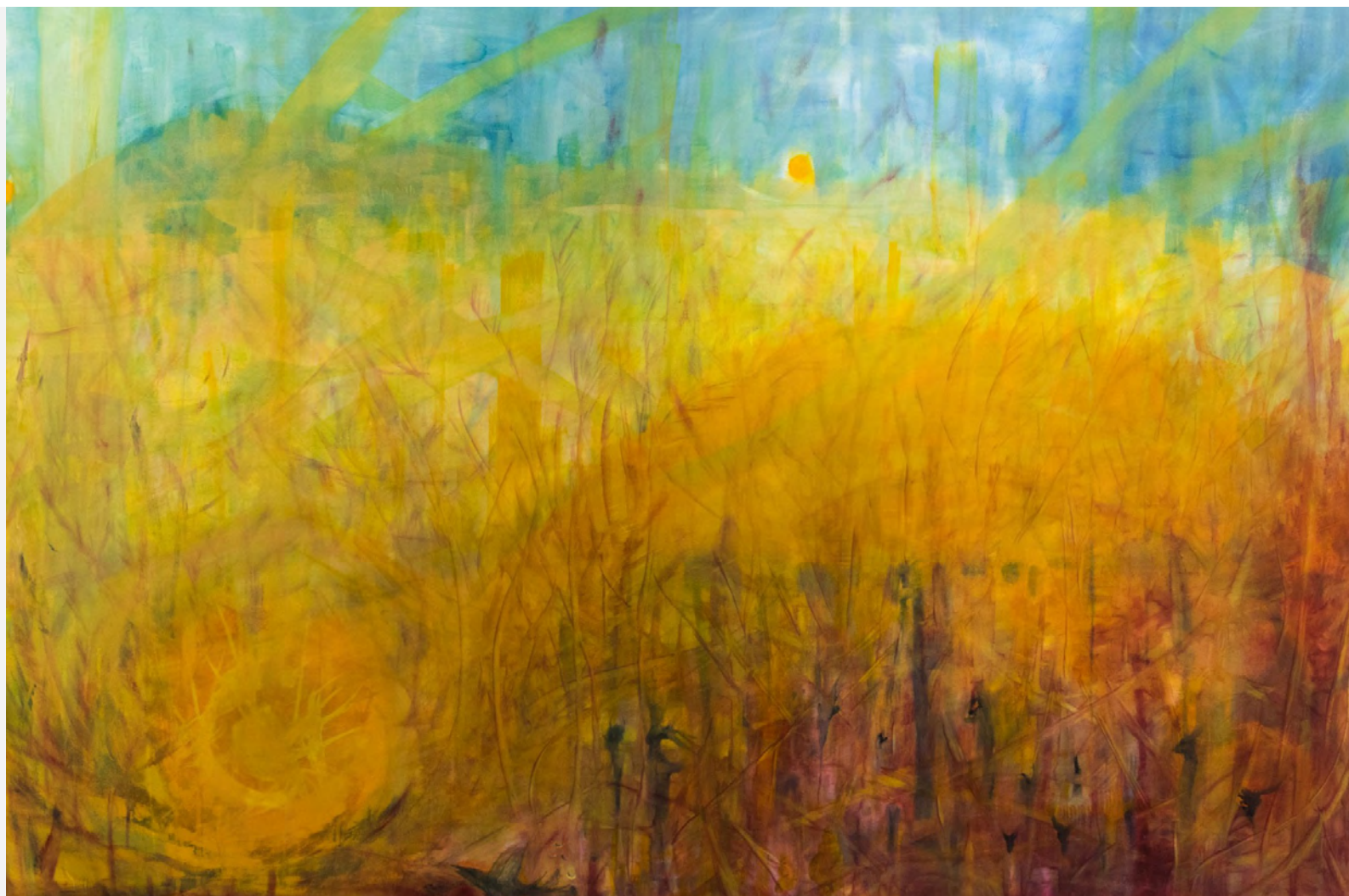
The land around archaeological sites is seldom documented and there is little interpretation or information about the species of plants or animals. To address this, I have taken an holistic approach, documenting human and animal interactions with the mound. Animal bones and animal tracks are scattered all over the Belas Knap landscape, and I cannot help but wonder how significant the behaviour of animals, their paths and tracks may have been to prehistoric people.



**Figure 12.**  
Belas Knap,  
Animal Tracks next to the  
long barrow, England  
(Digital Image)  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
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Indeed, our human interaction with Belas Knap is ongoing. Located on a popular walking route, 'The Cotswold Way,' it has hundreds of visitors every year. I was curious about why people came and what they thought about it. Over the years it has become clear that some people have a need to visit Belas Knap for their wellbeing, visiting the site regularly. Many said the mound gave them a feeling of peace. Some had scattered the ashes of a loved one and returned to remember them. Several of these people were in fact quite unwell with a range of long-term health conditions, such as Fibromyalgia, Parkinson's, learning disabilities, dementia and depression.





**Figure 13.** 'Underworld'  
Spirit beings in the barrow  
landscape, oil on canvas,  
size: 30" x 60"  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
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They had concerns about being physically unable to make the journey, and whether their memories alone would be enough to keep them well? Some have pictures of Belas Knap in their houses, and some have made small shrines in their gardens. They often take a stone from the mound home and bring offerings to the barrow in return usually flowers from their gardens left in a chamber or on the forecourt.



**Figure 14.**  
'Earth Spirits', reimagined  
ploughed out round  
barrow next to Belas Knap,  
watercolour, size: 20" x 10"  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
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**Figure 15.**  
'Belas Knap Cosmology'  
Representation of a  
human lower jawbone,  
found within the  
forecourt, Belas Knap  
(digital image)  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
Poraj-Wilczynska

Clearly, Belas Knap is a place that triggers feelings of comfort; people come there to feel good, to feel something other than their worries, to relax into a meditative state pondering the distant past and remember past visits with friends and family. But some come there to forget. It seems extraordinary that a monument built thousands of years ago should still be the focal point for human interaction.

Belas Knap was built to last, a home for the ancestors and the thirty-eight skeletons buried inside. It is a time machine that prompts memory. Its structure is womb-like, enclosing and protecting. It may have been a place of the dead during the Neolithic with rituals that we will never comprehend. However, this ancient monument for some now provides comfort and nurture, its permanence in the landscape an emotional and spiritual anchor.

The images in this portfolio were recently part of the Belas Knap art and archaeology exhibition shown at Corinium Museum Cirencester England.

Alongside multimedia artwork, the film of the shimmer was screened, and a soundscape played on a loop in the gallery. The initial response from the public has been unexpected. It seems that the combination of images, sounds, and exhibits have combined to transport the viewers to Belas Knap. Comments such as 'chilled out' and 'relaxed' 'evocative' and 'peaceful', 'immersive' were recorded; many visitors returned to view several times. Perhaps multi-sensory exhibitions could be used to support our health, well-being and memory.

Often all that remains of excavated monuments is a dark stain or outline on the surface of the ground. Archaeology takes things apart until there is nothing left. However, I have experienced these traces, and have found them to be powerful and compelling. The memory of collective intention to craft and shape the natural and spiritual world, if we can connect to this, we can experience a sense of place.



**Figure 16.**  
'Barrow Lands'  
England, Belas Knap  
long barrow  
© 2022 Elizabeth  
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