Centre for the GeoHumanities

Newsletter No. 17
May 2026

Centre for the
GeoHumanities

Welcome to the seventeenth edition of the Centre for the GeoHumanities newsletter. Please get in touch with us at geohumanities@rhul.ac.uk if you have news you would like to share or would like your work featured.

Creative Commissions

Round Four

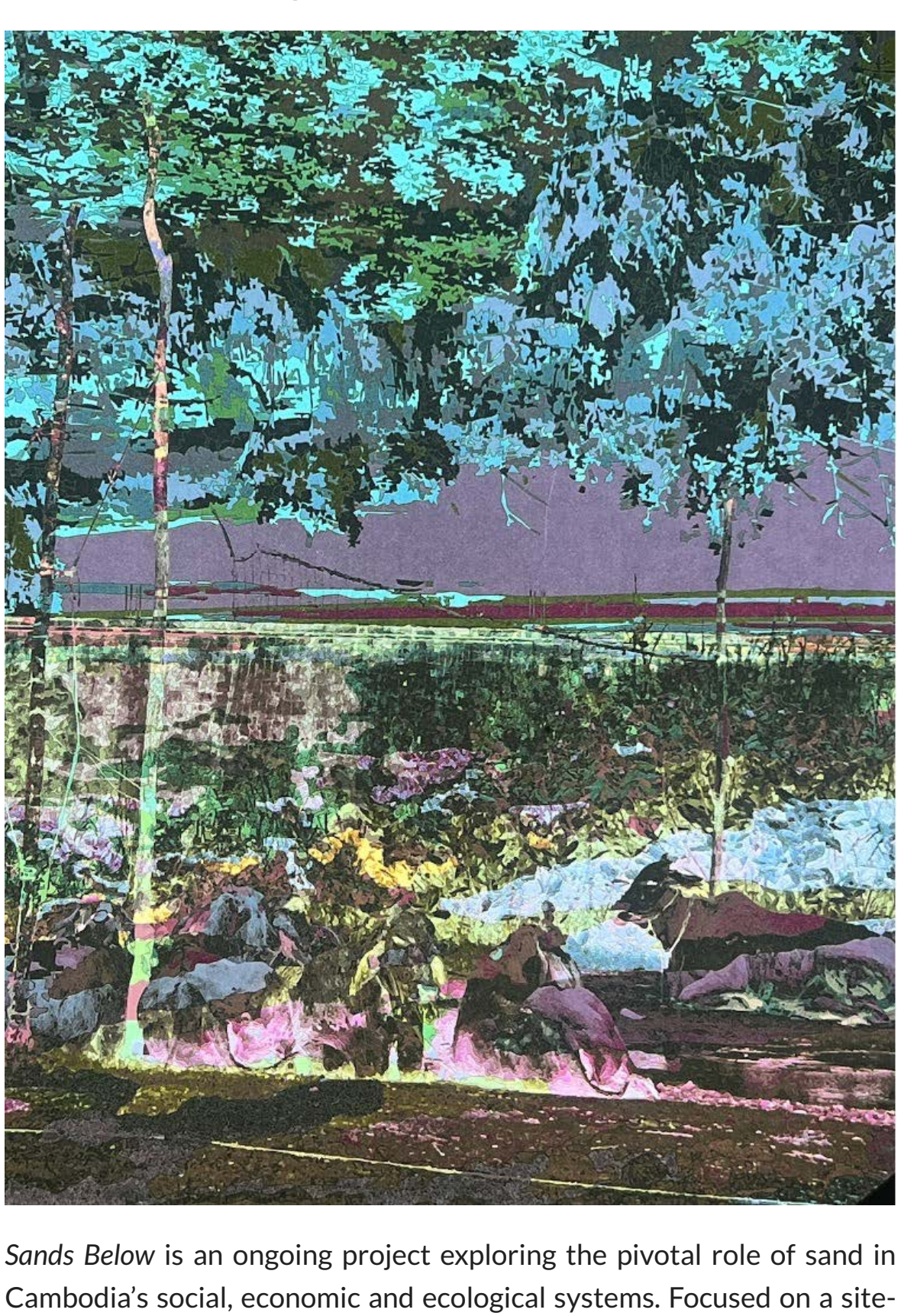
Subsurface

In collaboration with tiSamjort & Cambodia Living Arts

The Centre for the GeoHumanities inaugurated our Creative Commissions programme in 2017 with the aim of fostering relationships between early career researchers and creative practitioners. Four rounds of the programme have been held to date. The first, in 2018-19, was funded by the AHRC and focused on *Creating Earth Futures*. The second, *Variations in Mobility*, was convened in 2019-20 in collaboration with our partners at the Centre for Mobility Humanities in the University of Padua. In 2022 a third round under the theme of *Diasporic Worlds* was organised in collaboration with Royal Holloway's Hellenic Institute, the Cyprus High Commission and Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge.

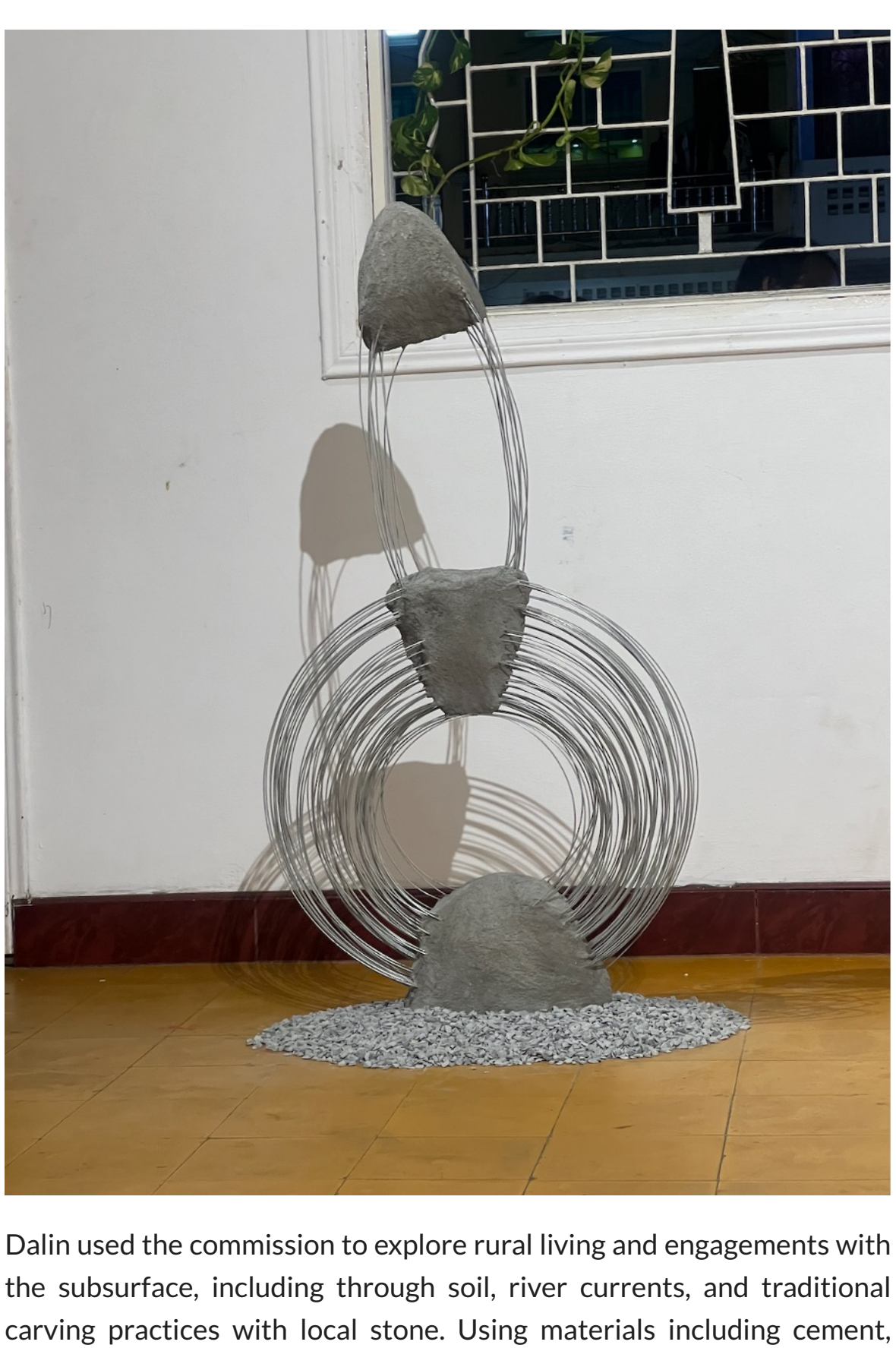
In 2025, in collaboration with the ERC-funded project *Think Deep* and the artist collective tiSamjort, we launched a fourth round of commissions on the theme of the *Subsurface*. Focused in Cambodia, the commissions funded three early-career artists developing ideas on the Cambodian subsurface in collaboration with researchers on the Think Deep project. This round included mentorship with experienced artists from tiSamjort and a showcase of the work in progress in three 'critical studios events' in Phnom Penh, organised by tiSamjort and project PI Harriet Hawkins. tiSamjort are an artists collective run out of a community arts space in Phnom Penh, where they focus on making work and building the local artistic community in collaboration with communities across Cambodia. The successful artists were: Prak Dalin, who developed the sculptural series *Assemblage*; Mech Sereyrath who created the multi-media installation *Underneath* and Kong Siden, who developed the first chapter of their project *Sands Below*.

Kong Siden, *Sands Below*



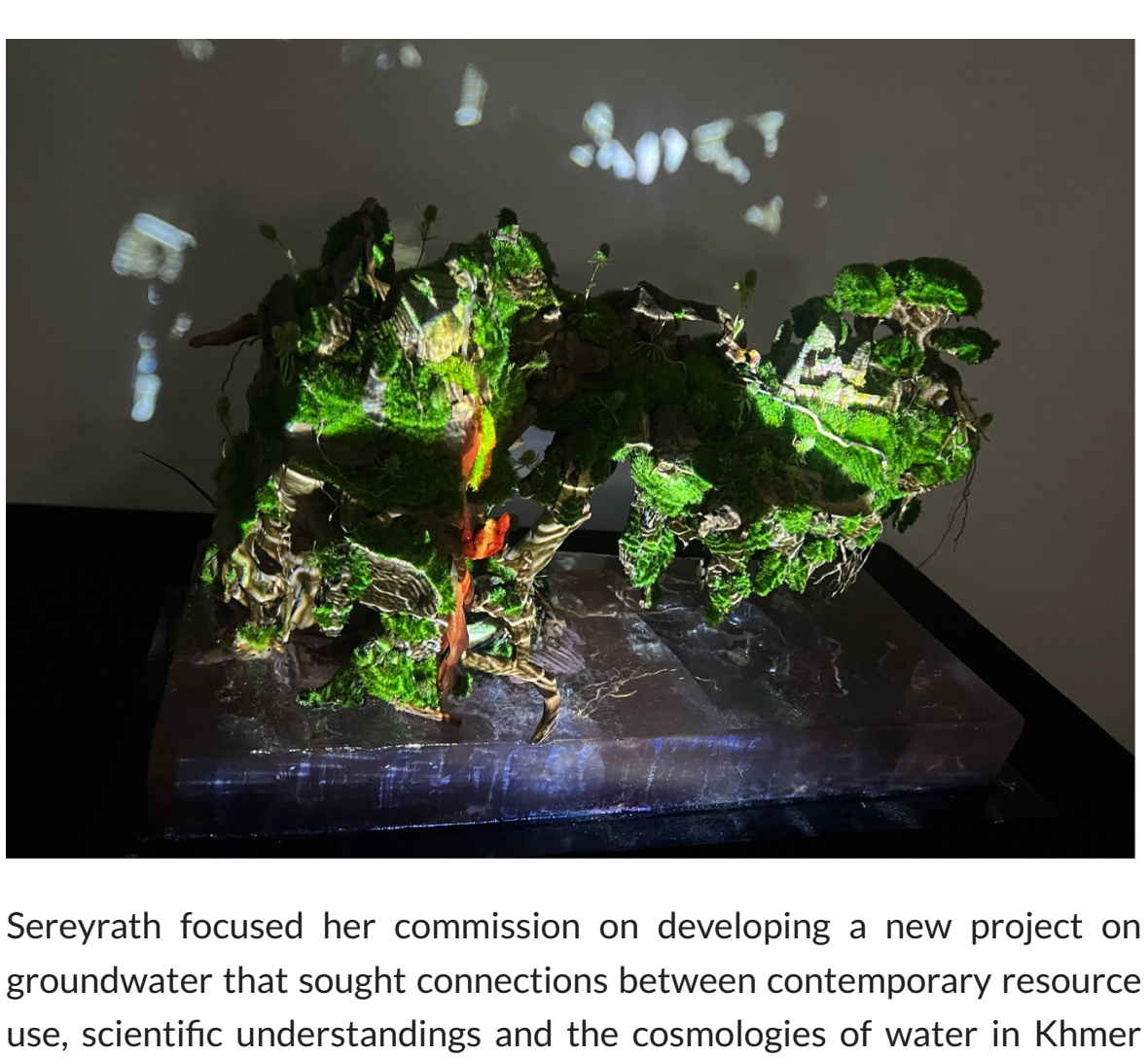
Sands Below is an ongoing project exploring the pivotal role of sand in Cambodia's social, economic and ecological systems. Focused on a site-based research process at Boeung Tamok Lake and using audio-visual materials of extraction at the site found online, the project culminated in a multi-media installation that explored dramatic alternation of the lake's surface, the displacement of communities and the transferal of natural resources. Using found-footage and animation, the project critiques the deceptive nature of these transformations, creating a dialogue between what is seen and what is imagined. The commission supported the first chapter of the work and enabled the exploration of site-based research practices and their challenges.

Prak Dalin, *Assemblage*



Dalin used the commission to explore rural living and engagements with the subsurface, including through soil, river currents, and traditional carving practices with local stone. Using materials including cement, Cambodian Golden Silk, Charcoal, found wood and stones she produced a series of sculptural forms reflecting on the subsurface in culture, place and memory. She undertook a series of research visits ahead of her studio work, including to sites of extraction where the blasting processes were not only reshaping mountain tops, but the ground under local villages, and worked with local crafts people weaving and carving in rural Cambodia. The developed work supported Dalin to expand her sites and material vocabulary beyond urban spaces and enabled her to deepen her engagement with traditional Cambodian craft practices and materials.

Mech Sereyrath, *Underneath*



Sereyrath focused her commission on developing a new project on groundwater that sought connections between contemporary resource use, scientific understandings and the cosmologies of water in Khmer Society. Developing site-based research at the ancient temple site of Angkor Wat, once the centre of a vast 'hydraulic city', she discussed the challenges of groundwater extraction faced by the site's conservators and local villages. Creating a series of sculptural works using resin, fabric and projected light she sought to create an experience of going underground, enabling the audience to explore the cultural, social and scientific dimensions of groundwater. Sereyrath used the commission to advance her artistic practice including her digital media skills, which she has continued to develop in work on sensing environments above and below the surface of landscapes and human and animal bodies.

The Subsurface project received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 863944 THINK DEEP).

Research News

Siân Bowen: Plant Humanities on the Move

The artist and researcher Siân Bowen, an Honorary Research Associate in the Centre, has a long track record of practice-based visual arts research in the field of plant humanities. Amongst her previous projects are the Leverhulme-funded *After Hortus Malabaricus: Sensing and Presencing Rare Plants*, in collaboration with Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh and Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary; *Snow Bleaching, Sap Tapping and the Alchemy of Plants* (funded by the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation & Daiwa Foundation); and work on the ephemeral nature of museum collections (reflected in *Suspending the Ephemeral: Siân Bowen and Nova Zembla*, with the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (supported by AHRC), and *Gaze*, with the V&A, London (supported by Arts Council England). These projects and more are described on Siân's website, www.sianbowen.com (NB this works better on some browsers, e.g. Safari)

An award from QEST is currently enabling Siân to work in a remote area of northern Japan with renowned paper maker, Yasuo Kobayashi. Over the winters of 2026 and 2027, she is investigating the extraordinary practice of *yuki-zarashi* or snow-bleaching where, resting on top of three to four metres of snow, paper fibres are lightened through sun and moisture. The final wet sheets of paper are then stored in snow chambers and later further lightened through drying on aged wooden boards placed upon the snow-covered landscape.

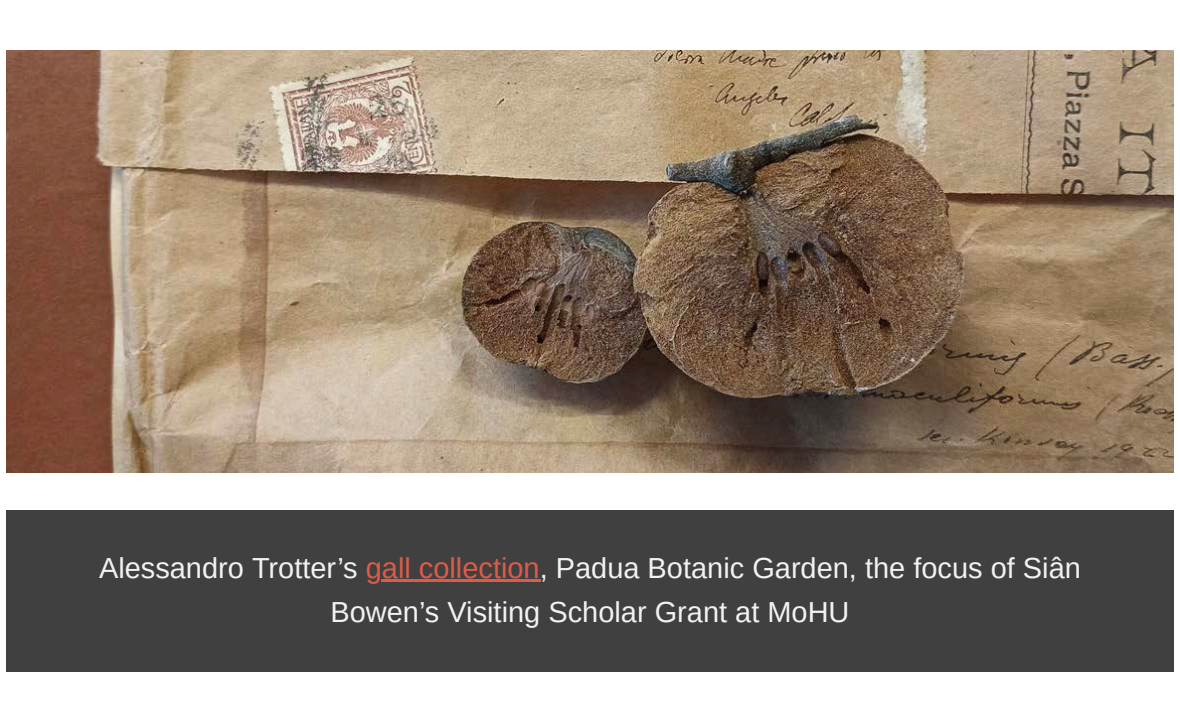
During Siân's first visit to Kobayashi's workshop in March of this year, he asked what drew her to Japan to learn about *yuki-zarashi* and to work with him at this point in her life. This was her response:

As an artist, yuki-zarashi has for me, very poetic associations. But it is also scientific, ecological, practical and uses minimal resources.

I was very intrigued by the concept of how snow could be used to create different shades of white in washi (handmade Japanese paper) without chemicals.

The ephemeral and states of flux have been central themes in my own work for a long time. Particularly, in relation to light and the natural environment. So, I wanted to observe not only how yuki-zarashi washi was made but also experience walking, seeing, smelling the yuki- kuni (snow-country). I was interested therefore to experience making yuki-zarashi paper from multi-sensory perspectives – both inside the workshop and outside in the landscape.

Before I came to this area of Japan, I was very interested to read of your concepts about nature and what it can mean to be someone who has devoted their life to making washi. For example: "I think of myself as a farmer (not an artisan)"; "When I look at my kozo trees I ask, 'What kind of paper would they like to become?'".



Alessandro Trotter's gall collection, Padua Botanic Garden, the focus of Siân Bowen's Visiting Scholar Grant at MoHU

A recent award from our partners in the Centre for Mobility Humanities at the University of Padua (MoHu for short) will enable Siân to develop her research interests in a new direction. A Visiting Fellowship at MoHu, under the title *Silently on the Move: Botanical Narratives through Refuge, Debris and Flight*, will focus on galls – localized outgrowths on external plant tissue. The project will work with the cecidological collection of Alessandro Trotter, housed within the museum of Padua's botanical garden, as both a physical and conceptual place of temporary habitation, refuge and flight. From the time that they first began to form, created through the actions of insects, mites, bacteria, or fungi, the galls were themselves on the move – evolving, developing and expanding – then to be collected, carried, stored, placed into storage, exhibited and repeatedly handled.

Siân's research will explore the unstable nature of these materials, aiming to uncover a narrative of movement by placing a focus on evidence of flight, ravaging, burrowing, shedding, crumbling. Taking the exit holes of the galls in the collection as a point of 'departure', focus will be on incidental and overlooked evidence of change. The aim therefore will be to present Trotter's galls, not as static and hermetically sealed dried objects, but as complex spaces of temporary refuge, retreat and escape, and subject to constant transformation. The small hand-held size galls thus significantly reach out to connect us with universal concerns.

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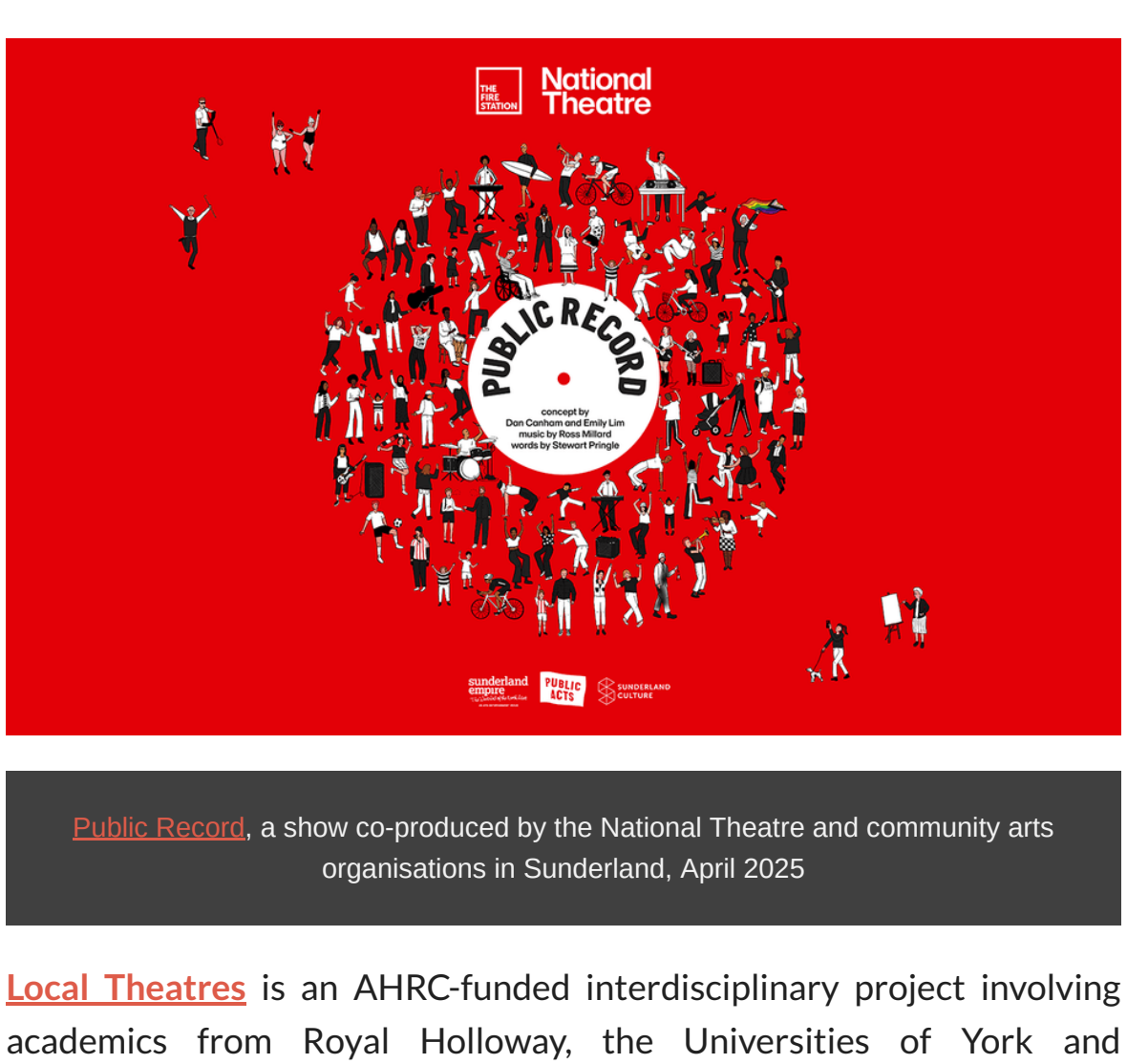
Local Theatres: Participation, Inclusion, Imagination

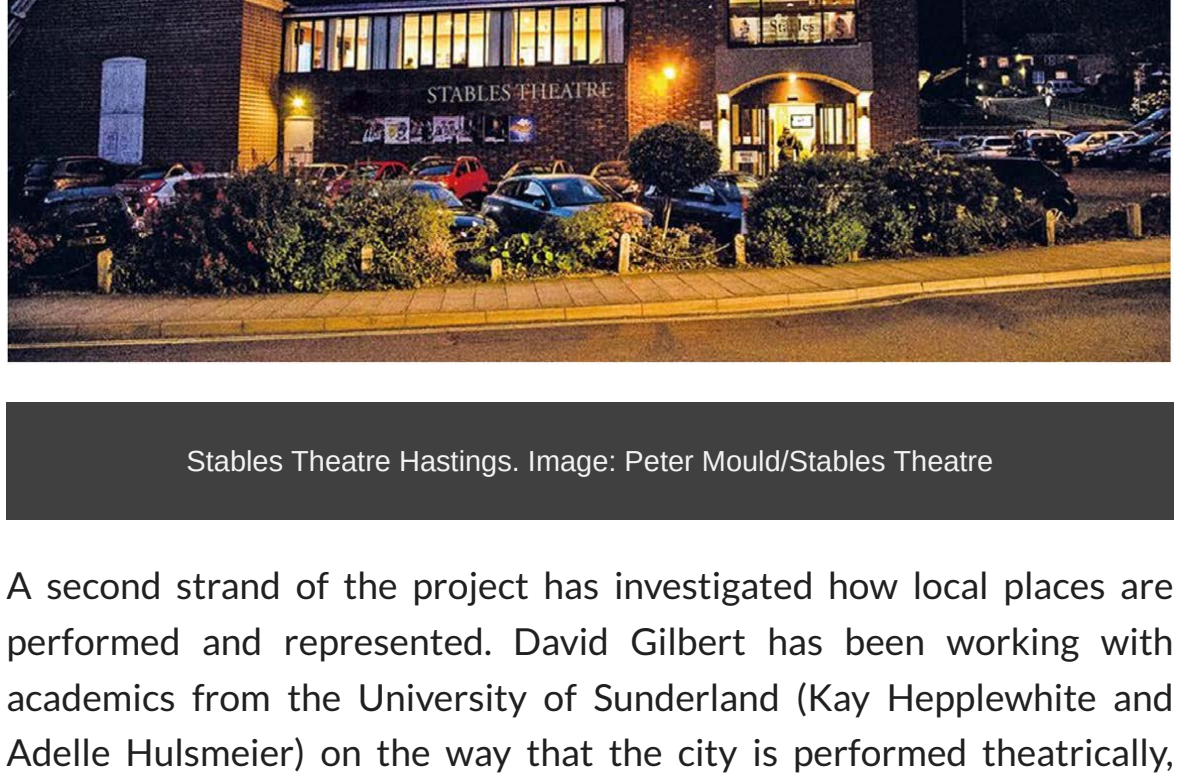


Public Record, a show co-produced by the National Theatre and community arts organisations in Sunderland, April 2025

Local Theatres is an AHRC-funded interdisciplinary project involving academics from Royal Holloway, the Universities of York and Sunderland, and Central School of Speech and Drama. The project examines the role of theatres, as local cultural organisations and storytellers, in responding to the complex politics and identities of places in times of social division. It involves three members of the Centre for GeoHumanities, all based at Royal Holloway: Helen Nicholson, Professor of Theatre and Performance, who leads the project: post-doctoral researcher Cara Gray; and David Gilbert from the Geography Department. This research takes place at a time when localism has re-entered the political lexicon. In England, place-based cultural policies have responded to successive government initiatives to increase local decision-making, address regional inequalities, boost local enterprise, and revitalise town centres. Living locally is also an environmental ideal, generating powerful feelings of belonging. But local cultures can also be inhospitable, exclusionary, and inward-looking. We have also seen some geographers and others turning to reconsider the nature of 'the local' and think about its relationship to work on place.

Across the project there is an emphasis on the relationship between theatres and their local populations, exploring both the ways that theatres serve those populations, and the ways that they are included in theatre, as participants and as audiences. The project includes a wide-range of examples and localities, including focused case studies in Coventry, Hastings, Slough, and Sunderland as well as different parts of London.

One strand of Local Theatres explores the place of theatres in the local creative ecology of places, particularly how theatres – amateur, community and professional –relate to the local state and to other arts institutions. Particular concerns are the strategies for inclusion used (or not used) by local theatres, and the way that theatres work with young people and provide training and opportunities. Cara Gray's work in Hastings focuses on the Stables Theatre as a local creative hub, and the way it does far more than just produce plays, through creating and sustaining local creative networks, supporting new writing, acting as a community hub, and working with young people and others to develop new skills. Cara's work emphasises the importance of the physical building in the locality, a theme that has run through other aspects of the project.



Stables Theatre Hastings. Image: Peter Mould/Stables Theatre

A second strand of the project has investigated how local places are performed and represented. David Gilbert has been working with academics from the University of Sunderland (Kay Hepplewhite and Adelle Hulsmeier) on the way that the city is performed theatrically, exploring representations of the post-industrial city. The project team were embedded in two contrasting productions, both performed in Spring 2025. *Public Record* was part of the Public Acts programme, bringing the expertise and resources of the National Theatre to Sunderland to make a play about the diversity of the city, and particularly its cultures of music and dance, drawing on the words and experiences of participants. Theatre Space's *Sunniside Stories* worked with the ideas and imagination of (mostly) first-time writers and performers to make a production about the history and culture of a small part of the city. In both there was a concern not to erase the industrial past, often a dominant strand in understanding Sunderland, but to overlay it with stories of diversity, movement and different local lives.

The project held a symposium at Royal Holloway in April 2026, bringing together the project team, academics from a range of disciplines, but particularly theatre leaders from a range of places and types of venue. The Symposium featured new work from Trybe House Theatre from Brixton responding to the local lives of young Black men in London. Geographer Tim Cresswell's keynote focused on performance and ecosystems presenting work from 'Here', his new project thinking through different ideas of the local. The key theme of the symposium was about how local theatres might provide beacons of hope, equity and civic pride in times of conflict and cultural fracturing.

The work is ongoing, and is funded until the end of 2026. For more about the project, click here

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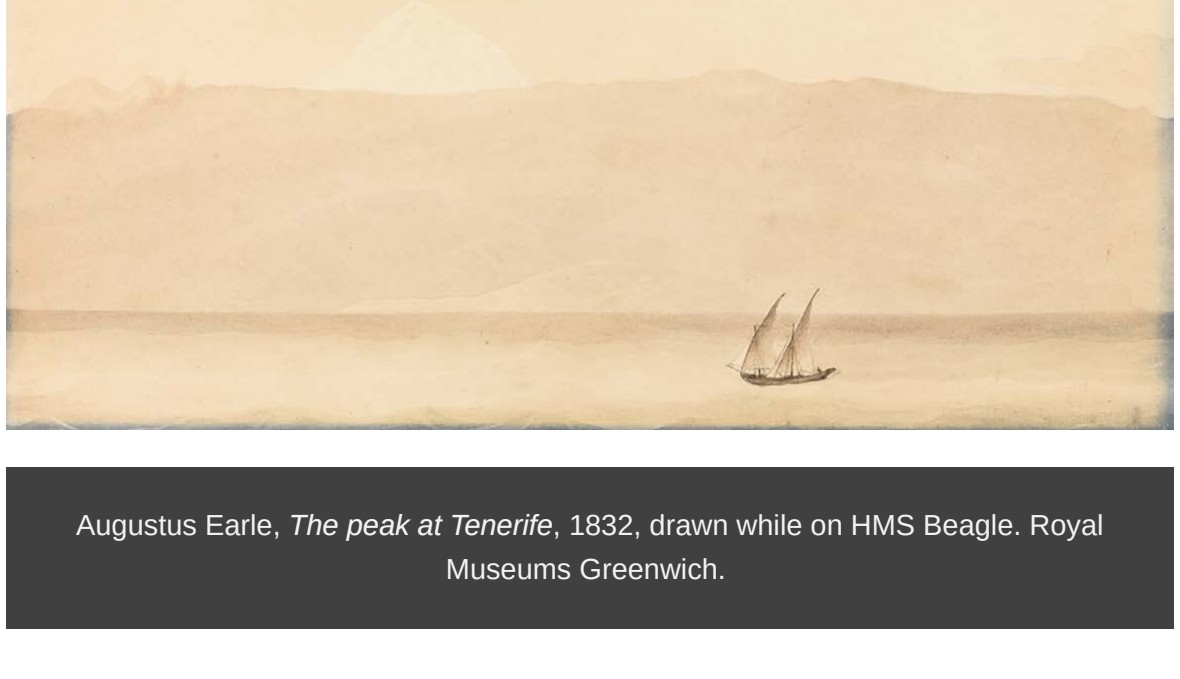
Centre Visitors

2026-27



Augustus Earle, *The peak at Tenerife*, 1832, drawn while on HMS Beagle. Royal Museums Greenwich.

The Centre for GeoHumanities continues to welcomes international visitors interested in our research and activities, many participating in the Landscape Surgery postgraduate seminar which meets fortnightly throughout the academic year. Since 2021, we have hosted academic visitors and PhD students from Delhi, Ontario, Padua, Paris, Nanjing, Naples, Neuchatel, Padua, Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai, Uppsala, Wuhan and Zurich.

In 2026 and 2007 we are delighted to welcome further visitors from our partner institutions in Padua and Rio de Janeiro, and further visitors from China and Turkey, with research interests across the GeoHumanities, including visual art, botanical collections, exploration, coastal mapping and intangible heritage.

Dr Claudia Addabbo is a postdoctoral researcher at our partner institute MoHu, University of Padua, working on a two-year project on *Herbaria on the move between history and botany: exploring scientific, political, and cultural narratives through Achille Forti's botanical collections (1878-1937)*. She visited the Centre in February 2026 to conduct archival research at the Natural History Museum, attending our PhD seminar Landscape Surgery and a Seminar in Plant Humanities at Kew.

Bruno Vieira is a PhD student at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, a partner of the Centre, working on landscape as a cultural and symbolic construction through painted representations of the Pedra de Guaratiba neighbourhood of Rio. He visited the Centre in Spring 2026 and contributed to a Landscape Surgery event on *Painting the Lie of the Land: Life Journeys and the Making of Place*, in collaboration with Veronica della Dora.

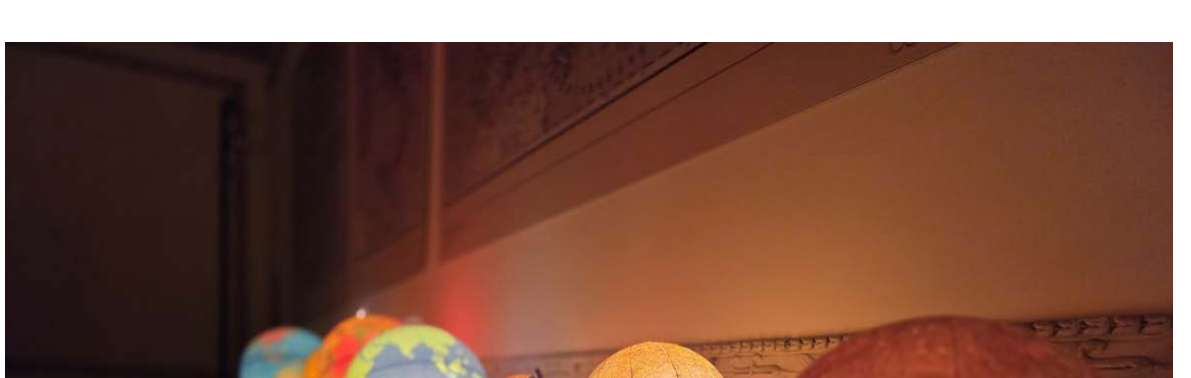
Kutsi Aybars Çetinalp is a PhD student in the History of Science & Technology programme of Istanbul Technical University, studying for a thesis on *Victorian Crusaders in the Holy Land: the Palestine Exploration Fund in Ottoman Palestine 1865-1914*. He will be a Guest PhD student in the Centre in 2026-7, supported by a scholarship from TÜBİTAK, the Turkish science and technology research council.

Xuerong Chen is a PhD student in the Centre for Historical Geographical Studies at Fudan University, Shanghai, studying for a thesis on *Coastal Profiles in Nineteenth-Century UK Hydrological Charts: A Focus on Eastern Asia*. She is planning to visit the Centre in 2026-7 supported by a visiting scholarship from Fudan University.

Events

Luminous globes at the Museum of Geography, Padua

A Review by Veronica della Dora



Illuminated globes at the University of Padua's Museum of Geography: an installation curated by Giovanni Donadelli, Dec 2025-Jan 2026

The luminous globe has kept watch over generations of children in their bedrooms. Both earthly sphere and night-light, it holds knowledge and wonder within its glow. It conjures up intimacy and triggers fascination for distant worlds. It stirs and expands the geographical imagination. It warms and charms.

Between 19 December 2025 and 11 January 2026, Padua University's Museum of Geography hosted around 50 luminous globes from different countries and eras in the largest display of its kind ever held in Italy.

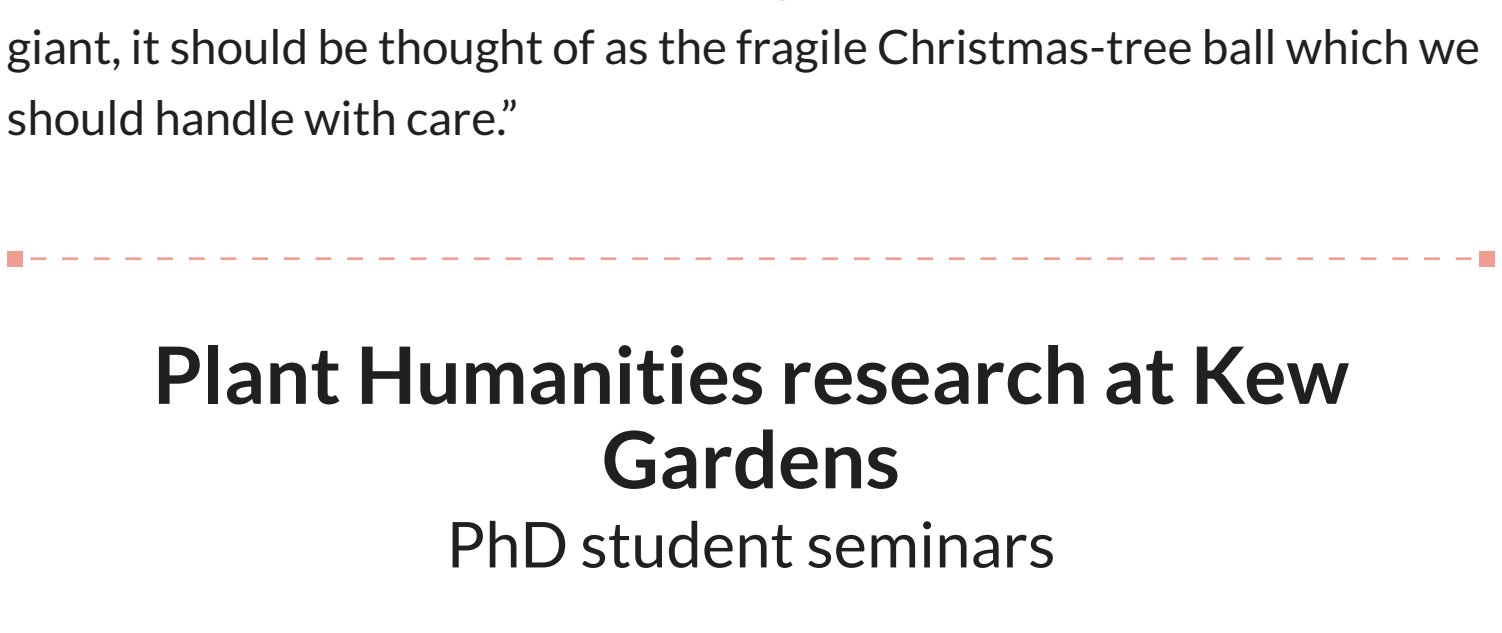
Conceived by the museum's curator Giovanni Donadelli, himself a collector of luminous globes, *Have a Goodnight* was much more than an exhibition or immersive installation. It was a visual poem. Showcasing exemplars ranging from rare early twentieth-century globes to brightly coloured Disney models, it temporarily turned a prestigious hall of Palazzo Wollemborg into a cozy bedroom in which spheres of all sizes and hues lay quietly suspended in the darkness. A magic twilight world in which the familiar was made strange and the strange familiar, where oceans turned pink, yellow and black, where pastel tones alternated with vibrant vintage palettes, where the USSR and Yugoslavia shone in amber glow. A peaceful microcosm where, in Donadelli's words, "light does not simply illuminate—it evokes memories". Roaming from one sphere to the other, scouring countries no longer on the map, lingering over the vivid detail, the eye wandered between imagined worlds and faded childhood reveries. Visitors suddenly found themselves at once at home and lost, in a place where time seemed to have been gently suspended.

The timing of the exhibition—during the Christmas holidays—could have not been more fitting. Stepping into that little magic world on a cold winter afternoon, one could help but recall the words of the Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders as he glimpsed our life-swirling planet while orbiting the distant lunar shores:

"If you can imagine yourself in a darkened room with only one visible object, a small blue-green sphere about the size of a Christmas-tree ornament, then you can begin to grasp what the Earth looks like from space. I think that all of us subconsciously think that the Earth is flat or at least almost infinite. Let me assure you that, rather than a massive giant, it should be thought of as the fragile Christmas-tree ball which we should handle with care."

Plant Humanities research at Kew Gardens

PhD student seminars



The palm house at Kew Gardens, drawing by Edward Bawden, c.1950s

Collaborative doctoral research students in the Centre for GeoHumanities contributed many of the seminars in a monthly seminar series in 2025-26 convened by Caroline Cornish, humanities coordinator at Kew and an affiliate member of the Centre. The Hothouse Seminars are designed for PhD students and others at Kew interested in the Plant Humanities, as featured in the November 2025 Newsletter. Below are the seminars contributed by Royal Holloway PhD students, all of whom are funded by UKRI.

Aurora Prehn: *The Biocultural Diaspora of Tea in the 21st Century: Cultivation in the UK and the USA* (25 Sept 2025)

Viveca Mellegård: *Indian indigo then and now: integrating filming, writing, and archives* (30 Oct 2025)

Christina Hourigan: *Tree biographies and the cultural history of place at Kew* (27 Nov 2025)

Jack Seagrove: *Kew and the British Virgin Islands: From Botanic Stations to Tropical Important Plant Areas* (29 Jan 2026)

Sophia Kamps: *Publishing and Illustrating Natural History in Victorian and Edwardian Britain: Lovell Reeve, 1840-1920* (26 March 2026)

Michelle Payne: *Reinterpreting Marianne North: Life Writing, Botanical Travel and the Legacies of Empire* (25 June 2026)

Dancing across Disciplines

Dancing Across Disciplines was a one-day event in Durham on 28 April 2026, hosted by the Institute for Medical Humanities and the Moving Bodies Lab. It featured researchers and practitioners working with dance from different disciplinary backgrounds, showcasing interdisciplinary work across a range of topics, methodologies, and experiences. Amongst the talks was a presentation by Sofie Narbed of the Centre for GeoHumanities entitled "Attending: three ways".

The event was designed to prompt reflection and discussion across disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences. While scholarship on dance spans multiple disciplines, these perspectives do not always intersect fruitfully. The aim was bring them more fully into dialogue in order to create new insights into research practice and exchange.

The Moving Bodies Lab seeks to investigate and experiment with the ways in which moving bodies connect to health. Its research starts with the moving body itself and the methodological issues and opportunities that moving bodies create. The Lab currently includes Bridging Fellow Daniel P. Jones, who studied for an MA in Cultural Geography (Research) at Royal Holloway prior to undertaking his PhD at Newcastle on the geographies of impulse seen through the lens of Tourette's syndrome.

London Group of Historical Geographers

Seminars Summer 2026

12 May 2026 - **Heather Ellis** (University of Sheffield)
Feeding the Nation's Children: School Meals, Inequality, and the Politics of Care in Modern Britain

26 May 2026 - **Paul Griffin** (Northumbria) & **Cheryl McGeachan** (University of Glasgow)
Building from the Basics: Collaborative Writing in Historical Geography

9 June 2026 - **Veronica della Dora** (Royal Holloway, University of London)
The Man Who Made Planets: Kenneth S. Fagg's Journey from Air Age to Space Age

All seminars are open to all, beginning at 5:30pm and are available online. Those on 12 May and 9 June will also take place in person at the Institute of Historical Research. **To register to attend any of the seminars please** click here

The London Group of Historical Geographers is co-convened by Felix Driver and Innes Keighren (Royal Holloway Centre for the GeoHumanities), Miles Ogborn (Queen Mary) and Margot Finn (UCL).

Prize Publication

2025 *Area* Prize

We are delighted to share the news that a paper by Maddie Joyce, one of the Centre's PhD students, has been selected as the winner of the 2025 *Area* prize for excellent geographical research published by early-career scholars. The prize has been awarded annually since 2001: this is the first time a Royal Holloway researcher has won it. The prize will be presented at the annual meeting of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) in June 2026.

Maddie's paper, 'Sensing the sky's edge: Atmospheric insights into the Korean demilitarised zone', part of her Royal Holloway-funded PhD on the Korean Demilitarised Zone, was inspired by the atmospheric methods pioneered within the Centre for GeoHumanities by Sasha Engelmann. The *Area* editors describe her paper as follows: as follows:

With this innovative article, Madelaine Joyce pushes cultural and political geographers to attend closely and creatively to both affective and material atmospheres. Taking the anticipation of an encounter with the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea as both prompt and problematic for rethinking borders across fog, radio signals, and no-go zones, Joyce's article is a deserving Area Prize winner.

You can read the paper here

Also "highly commended" by the RGS was Rosie Knowles, until recently a PhD student in the Centre for GeoHumanities, for a paper entitled 'Narrating health and well-being with vulnerable participants: the ethics of composite fiction as a creative method in health geographies', which you can read here

9th Cosgrove Lecture

Lithic Lives: Earth Stories from Cambodia's Land of the Gemstones

Harriet Hawkins
(Royal Holloway, University of London)

Monday 11 May 2026

Royal Holloway University of London
Moore Building auditorium
5:30pm, followed by a reception

A fragment of ruby, a hand-written list of sapphire sales from February 1918, a much-loved pop song crooned during Cambodia's second 'Golden-Age', a necklace of tumbled garnet chips, a golden otter, a mosquito infected with drug-resistant malaria, a head-dress from Ancient Rome, an up-turned muddy plastic bottle on a bamboo stick. Any and all of these offer generative beginnings for telling Earth Stories from Cambodia's Land of the Gemstones.

The Land of the Gemstones, located in Cambodia's North-Western forested uplands, has for millennia been a source of gemstones, a site of geopolitical controversy and a richly fabled land. Yet in the wake of the Khmer Rouge whose genocidal regime was funded by extraction of stones and timber from the area, many of these stories remain untold. For the past three years we (a group of Cambodian and British researchers and artists) have been collaborating with miners, cutters, dealers, stones and spirits to track gemstone geobiographies and explore the lithic intimacies of lives lived seeking, shaping and protecting gemstones.

The Earth Stories we share here draw together ethnography, image, song and stone in a geopoetic response to the challenges of living and researching lithic lives in the Land of the Gemstones. Some of these challenges are unique to this place and its practices, others are shared with those mining around the world and all sit within the impulse to complicate the Earth stories that colonialisms have told.

This lecture draws on the experience of Harriet and her team working on THINK DEEP, a research project funded the European Research Council.

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