

GROUND (ED)

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Siobhan Liddell

Dusk

20 February – 28 March 2026

companions

Ground, or the feeling of being grounded suggests rootedness and security: living figures breathe on solid surfaces; they are *able to be*. The word *ground* suggested itself as a spur for this text before it cantered off in multiple psychological directions: charges. First, there is the geological spectre of ground – its shapes and its histories, which are of significance for Siobhan Liddell, who has spoken of her research of landforms with an investigative intrigue, and who has demonstrated this fascination through painted cliffs and landscape in previous bodies of work. In grounding, there is a yielding to something, a search, matter or intent deposited both literally on ‘ground’ but also more widely within psyche and history. *Soils* is an old textbook that recently resurfaced amidst my childhood belongings, prompting the memory of how physical geography was taught academically and made difficult. This unimaginative pedagogy makes explicit a connection with youthful/wilful blind spots, ignorant of what now seems of unequivocal importance – that the ground is a line of generative beginnings: from earth comes soil, which can only mean possibility, new growth, mineral portent. There are always coincidental connections in things, and for Liddell this magnetism is perhaps the inner aspect of the material conditions of her making – a set of relations drawn from physical touchstones that relate to states of being; looking, longing, lounging and living. In Deleuze’s 1981 public lectures he looks to painting as something in and for itself, trying not to impose a pre-given framework, rather building his theories on specific material gestures and texts mostly written by artists themselves. In setting out his premise, he notes:

*We have an initial moment of decomposition into two aspects: first, there is the chaos-abyss, where I see nothing. Then a second aspect emerges from this initial moment. Something emerges for the chaos-abyss: the great planes, a sort of geology. Then there is the second moment: catastrophe sweeps away the strata and the great planes.*¹

Liddell’s *Staffa* (2025) is a painting of the titular island, a small body of land in the Hebrides depicted here held between a ceramic edge of water and sky: it is sandwiched. *Staffa* folds into Deleuze’s preliminary thoughts, where much of the early discussion about Cézanne centres on discussion of his ‘planes’ that form the basis of the construction of the image and a practice of *reaching through* a chaos-abyss. *Staffa* is small at only half a mile wide and holds Fingal’s cave and famous puffin colonies. Liddell’s painting, in its rectangular containment, offers itself in initial opposition to the sublime bigness of the analogised land she depicts – registered only by the proximate context of a tiny figure on the rock-fronted cliff. Liddell has also visited this place – a concurrent interest in *Staffa*’s geological formation led her there – with the action of subsequent painting perhaps wielded as witness or examiner, as a method of understanding or a mode for thinking through: setting feet on ground to test. In *Staffa* this sense of restraint is an inverse of the possible experience of place, delicately formed; it is

a suggestion of edges, and the mind must fill in any solid matter. Liddell ruptures the scene with an object: a cardboard toilet roll tube. By placing a projecting cylinder through ethereal space, by slitting a vector of sight towards something suggesting reality, by protruding through it, towards the eye at one end and darkness at another, by hovering above air, above sea, through rock, Liddell brings you paradoxically close. The invitation of participation is a line out to the viewer to scrutinise, with the handmade telescopic premise something to evoke the failure of purity within representation. It remains both an idea and an instant, left floating on top of fried clay. Its precocity is a thing of wonder but also a place of escape.

Dust (2025) is a work with pipe cleaner wires suspending ceramic balls over a painted canvas. If ground is firm then dust is loose, dematerialised matter, evocative – ‘dust to dust’² – a sign of stillness and end of life, or disturbed dust perceived as something moved, caught in shafting light as molecules refract and illuminate tiny flightpaths. Dust inserts itself within a historical and conceptual tradition of painted gray: ‘Gray on gray. You’re not a painter if you haven’t painted gray’.³ Yet, as is often the case with Liddell’s language, the balls held aloft create a game that derails our consumption of the painted surface; they bridge toward a three dimensional teetering, like a simple trick offered with childish delight.

*You want grays? well, you’ve got them! And greens, all the greenish grass in the whole world. The surrounding hills are high enough, it seemed; they appear low, and it rains! [...] There’s a lake between two gores, a landscaped English lake. Sketchbook pages fall, already water-coloured, from the trees. Surely that’s all nature... But not as I see it. Do you understand?*⁴

Web (2025) offers a flattened perspectival shift. This painting is contained at its periphery by a set of ceramic speckled crests: half-moon shapes with gaps attached to the canvas edge, facing outwards, like small contented smiles. As with Seurat and other pointillists, the frame is an ornament but also adjacent to the picture plane, a gesture of detail evoking a continuation of looking to what is beyond this ‘frame’ and therefore beyond the ‘painted’ image itself. Liddell’s surface is also treated with speckles and appears flat, the image stripped to its essentials showing a cartoonish foot and hand – both on ground, *grounded*. Again, a hole passes through the canvas, sucking at a gold-leafed section of cardboard tube. This tube perforates the solidity of the hands and feet, creating a new reflective space of openings, something like the force field of a magnetic pull, or its opposite repulsion.

Violet Mirror (2025) and *Sotto voce* (2025) could be thought of as refusals, offering initial resistance to image, through first-perceived blankness and skeuomorphism. In *Sotto voce* the painted wood is held up with the gesture of a sign or notice. The painting is made with a rubber woodgraining tool, a tool sometimes used for making decorative tromp l’oeil. Two pink ceramic hands hold each side of the canvas, alluding to an invisible

body that stands behind this image, a figure in the room but dimensioned out of sight, or according to the artist: this timber is a barricade, a flatness, from which something swells, something under the floor. Surface to surface, this unyielding 'board' harnesses no immediate pictorial narrative; the implication is of a floor just swept, hinting at a tidying away of language or instruction that is absent. The painting plays with the theatrics of presentation and the question of what is held up and to whom. Liddell probes at ambiguity, toward things that don't always give an answer, or to questions that are sometimes only a rhetorical act. With *Violet Mirror* Liddell began by laying different coloured paint with a palette knife. Here she was again drawn to the act of framing, using gold leaf as a device found not only in the archaeology of painting but also within the history of interior décor. Its colour and sheen make classic allusion to the politics of money and the weight of class within the age of representation. In Foucault's famous chapter on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, the role of the mirror offers a set of complex interrelations – that of space, that of looking but also that of the void, and a conception of unseeing where 'it must be admitted that this indifference is equalled only by the mirror's own. It is reflecting nothing... It is not the visible it reflects, in those bright depths'.⁵ Perhaps *Violet Mirror* reverberates with Foucault's sense of suspended agency, a body with vision and intent who absorbs but cannot itself locate a point of congruent reflection: the mirror remains temporarily blank and the world remains suspended. This work speaks of a mutual powerlessness – a parity between creator and receiver – but it does so with the refined hum of detail, decorated with ceramic appliqué leaves and a stair-like ceramic appendage extending downwards, a proffer from which to open or retreat: or perhaps access to options for what might yet be said, what might reveal.

*Man shouldn't be able to see his own face – there's nothing more sinister. Nature gave him the gift of not being able to see it, and of not being able to stare into his own eyes.*⁶

Living artists are also part of Liddell's material reckoning. In *Yale Center for British Art, Summer* (2025) she places us in a different space of suspension, in a real room where a talk between two artists is about to begin. This is one of a number of works in *Dusk* that are hitched to the notion of an event: it is the setting, the chairs, the table, a dialogue of waiting or scripting that is perhaps the actual subject of this painting. *Window* (2025) is formed from a photograph originally sent by a friend as a reminder of their planting a tree together, here distilled as an excised moment of reflection and pause. Painted leaves strung onto the canvas blow with a delicacy as deliberate as they are incidental, an evocation of offering out space towards the viewer who becomes suspended by the framed moment of the breeze: in the moment of recollection of a real tree whose leaves drop. Like a physical verdant necklace, the painting is strung, sure in its ambition to hold onto the flecks of light captured in multiple modes: by paint, by light, by jewel, by kinship.

Liddell's practice is indebted to her acts of looking for looking's sake. She borrows candidly from the scenography of painters and their places. Vermeer included detailed maps on the walls of his interiors; he was fanatical and precise, and likely painted them as fashionable motifs of knowledge and aspiration. For Liddell, painting a map became a way of finding familiarity before visiting a place. *Elsewhere* (2025) hums with a delicate and tender yearning of destination but also receded and dream-like figuration. A white anemone is another quotation excerpted from a digital image received via WhatsApp. Calibrating this scene is complicated because the image indexes information inspired from multiple registers of time – both contemporary and historical – where quotation, replication and projection are all funnelled onto the same image plane. *Elsewhere* stitches these moments together through a metaphorical lens that acts in sampling to provoke a sharpening of focus. This sense of focal adjusting is disrupted by the addition of glazed ceramic mushroom appendages, that hang like obdurate balls of material stuff to breakthrough the idea of a smoothed image and ensure that our sense of self as a human physicality is embodied within this space of looking.

Epilogue (2025) and *Vocation* (2025) are paintings that arrive via Fra Angelico and *The Annunciation* by Domenico Venezia. A painted door in the far distance of *Epilogue* is perhaps a material rhyme with the stripped back wooden surface of *Sotto voce*. The construction of hypothetical and approximated places informs a sense of historical context, content and architectural detail that creates Liddell's dialectic of scene-setting. Her images follow lines of plausible subjective enquiry – *where are we; do I recognise this landscape; what is unfolding here; what are the power dynamics* – whilst also intimating the existence of another metanarrative that uses motifs of explicit painterly citation to displace the original contexts of her quotation, and create a new contemporary entanglement of viewer interrelations.

Ceramic objects are appended to paintings – suspending, dangling, rustling and edging, but in *Sorrow song* (2024), water flows from or towards a hand-made paper cup, the cup itself attached but cockeyed. It is the only work here with a carefully hand replicated vessel and as such adds a determined aspect to the canvas edge with its own fixed volume; the cup has purpose. A paper cup is often treated as throwaway receptacle, but it is a ubiquitous object that often exists in life-saving environments such as hospitals, temporary sites of rescue and emergency distribution. Liddell embeds the uncomfortable within a poetic tactility, using a mode of expression that excerpts beauty from everything, regardless of its adjacent tragedy or complication. This is the paradox of beauty; negating ruination, something held onto, despite context, for its aesthetic promise, glimpsed infallibly through squinted eyes.

Untitled (there there not there, here here not here) (2025) is another painted sign. Liddell calls this a 'patterning': words as shapes and shapes as language; the syntactical relationships are word games. William H. Gass adds a fitting take on this body of work that seeks to bring into our world

a coexistence where a deconstruction of the syntax of place, space and things happens simultaneously.

The tray is not handed to us on a tray, all its elements in order, co-existent, communal, clean of commentary. Rather the tray is broken apart and strung out, the glaze preceding the surface, the flaky patches on the raised rim as much in front of its frieze of metal grapes as the soap in advance of its fit... Our reading runs in loops of understanding as we gather a phrase together and then carry it on through the sentence like a package under our arm.⁷

In *All eyes* (2025), one of three paintings of an Emperor moth, Liddell records the insect seen whilst waiting for a ferry on the Isle of Mull. Rather than metaphor, these three works perform with a metonymical rhythmic persistence, resisting classic narrative triads: seeking instead a continuous present. They are strange objects of great fragility, part of a unique living dustiness, but insects too whose structural complexity provides intense strength with unique lightness. Their peacock-like eyespots mimic the predatory conditions of looking, weapons that entangle conditions of empathy and consumption. In *Shadow* (2025), a larger-than-life wasp creates shade from refracted light, the insect's weight making small, lens-like indentations that redirect these rays. Shadows and refractions, water, earth, dust and sky – all are taxonomical categories with their own philosophical and spiritual overtones as leitmotifs that perpetuate in Liddell's *Dusk*. At the clasping end-light of a day, dusk as a timescale exists like parentheses, two solid edges clinging onto substance before it is lost to the vapours of ambiguity. *Dusk* holds distortions of scale and size, placing the eye and body of the looker in a place of total receptiveness: as the porous hole of looking that can be endlessly added to, that holds and reshapes the potential for a model of vulnerability until they have warmed and can be once again reshaped.

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *On Painting* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2025), translated by Charles J. Stivale, pp.12–13.
- 2 ‘for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return’, Genesis 3:19.
- 3 Deleuze, *On Painting*, p.15.
- 4 Deleuze, *On Painting*, pp.14–15.
- 5 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1994) p.7.
- 6 Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2015) fragment 466, p.389.
- 7 William H. Gass, *Habitations of the Word: Essays* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1985) p.80.