
Gayle Chong Kwan

The Obsidian Isle

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Curriculum subjects:

Art and Design
Higher Photography
English
Modern Studies

Curriculum for Excellence:

Expressive Arts - Art and Design
Social Studies - People, past events and societies

Chong Kwan's 'The Obsidian Isle' is a fictional island supposedly located off the west coast of Scotland in the Inner Hebrides, on which exist the country's lost and destroyed buildings and places. The work plays with wider ideas of collective history, national identity, landscape, tourism, and the distortion of memories, through the prism of the particularities of Scotland. From structures that fell into dereliction after the Highland Clearances, buildings destroyed during the Second World War, places torn down to make way for new developments, or structures that collapsed due to poor construction, the island is a place where visitors are invited to remember or possibly to collectively 'forget'.

'The Obsidian Isle' questions what is kept, what remains, what falls into ruin or is destroyed, what persists and how these can be altered by memories, myth, the senses or competing histories. 'The Obsidian Isle' is an installation of photographs and sculptural works consisting of: ten large-format photographic c-type prints of views which connect up to form a panoramic vista of the island; a series of myriorama photographic prints which play with ideas of sensory abstraction and altered memories, developed by the artist through a series of workshops and events in which people were invited to create blind drawings, tactile printing, memory maps and upside down mirror drawings; and sensory aids for use by visitors on the island, which reference Claude glasses and framing devices.

Chong Kwan's 'The Obsidian Isle' refers to a controversial literary work by Ossian, the blind 3rd century poet who was 'discovered' by James Macpherson in the 18th Century, and who was presented to the public as the narrator and supposed author, of a cycle of epic poems, translated from fragments of ancient sources in Scots Gaelic. A controversy raged at the time around its publication, Samuel Johnson called Macpherson "a mountebank, a liar, and a fraud, and that the poems were forgeries", Hugh Blair upheld its authenticity, and a Committee for the Highlands was set up to investigate its sources and the veracity of Macpherson's claims.

Information on the artist

Gayle Chong Kwan works with photography, video, sound, installation, performance and collaborative practice to create mise-en-scene landscapes and environments out of disturbing arrangements of waste, food, found materials and documentary sources. Chong Kwan, born Edinburgh 1973, is based in London and has shown extensively in the UK and internationally. She holds a BA in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins College of Art, a BA in Politics and Modern History from Manchester University, a MSc in Communications from Stirling University and is currently undertaking a practice-based PhD at the University of the Arts, London.

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Activity 1**Photography and History**

- Look at some of the images from 'The Obsidian Isle' and see if there are any places that you recognize.
- Write a story or create an art work about one of the images or one of the places from the images, consider the people who would live in or be in that place.

Activity 2**Protection and Preservation**

- Draw from memory the places, buildings or landscapes that you remember which are now no longer there.
- Consider and discuss why they have disappeared and discuss what could be some of the reasons why the 'look' of our cities or countryside change.
- Consider and discuss what places or types of places you think are protected from being destroyed or torn down and what the reasons for this might be.
- Come up with your own criteria or reasons as to what places you think should be protected.
- Draw your favourite place and mind map why you think it is important to protect it from destruction. Take it in turns to make your case, then discuss the different competing claims on what should be protected or kept and the issues around this.

Activity 3**Collective Memories**

- Pick an event or part of your school's recent history that you were all involved in or experienced and each person must write and draw a short account of what happened, focusing on the details of what you remembered.
- Take it in turns to show and recount your version of events and discuss the areas in which people remembered or described things differently.
- Think about how you could express your particular way of 'seeing things' in terms of a visual art work.

Activity 4**Tourism, Photography and Memories**

- Consider and discuss the ways in which we are encouraged to remember memories or a visit to a particular place, and think about whether there is a format for tourist photographs.
 - Bring in or talk about a photograph that you remember from a family holiday and think about why it was taken in such a way and what that says about your family, the holiday or the way in which you experienced that place.
 - Consider what you think is missing in a photograph as a way of capturing or representing a memory or a memory of a place.
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