

# Dominantly

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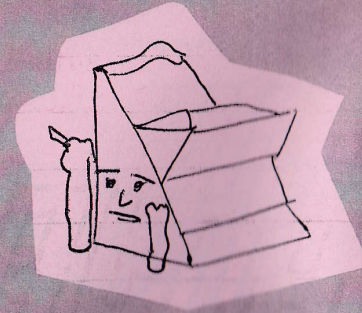
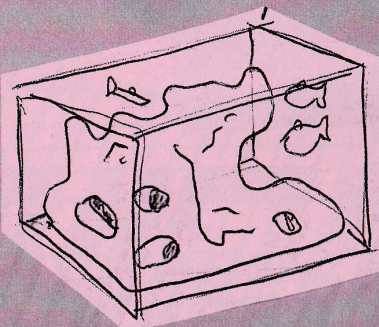
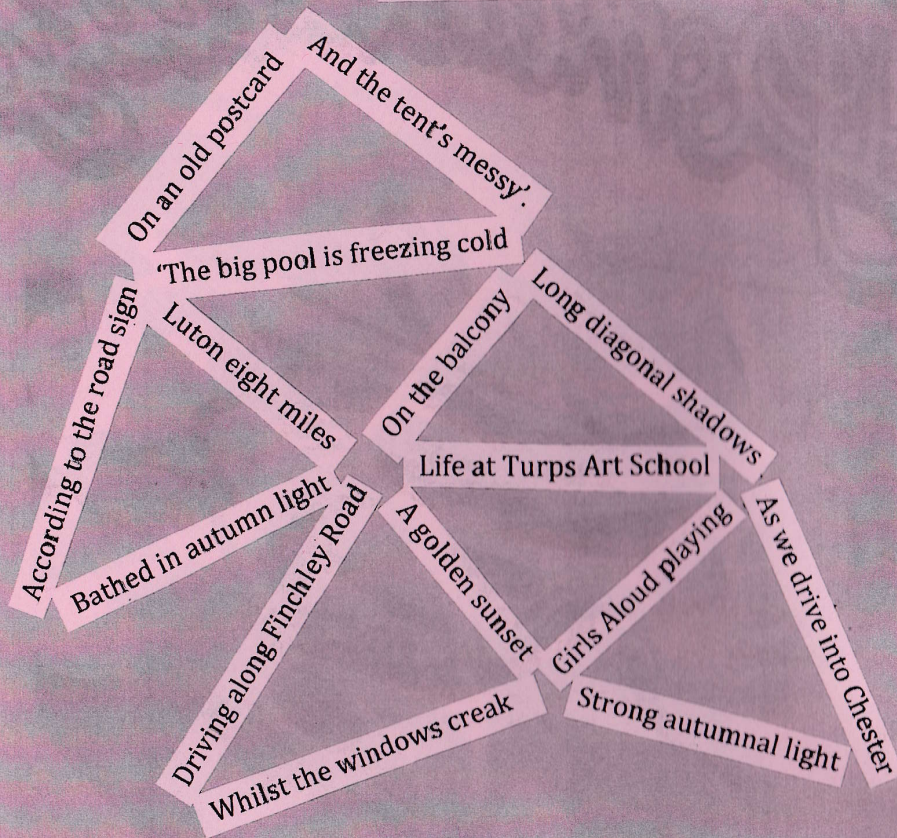
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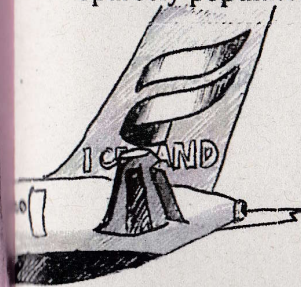
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# Darkness

After welcoming in the year 2016 by watching four episodes of *Frasier* back-to-back I went to bed, knowing that I had to be up early in the morning.

January 1<sup>st</sup> 2016 was the glorious return to work as an artist after a break of eight years. After an early breakfast of cereal and a cup of tea, my parents drove me to Manchester Airport. Following an all-too-brief visit to Caffè Nero, along with a now larger group of friends and family, I strolled eagerly through the airport towards the security area, armed with an array of warm clothing and bags filled with art materials, hats and gloves. I was heading off on my second artist residency, to the sparsely populated north coast of Iceland.



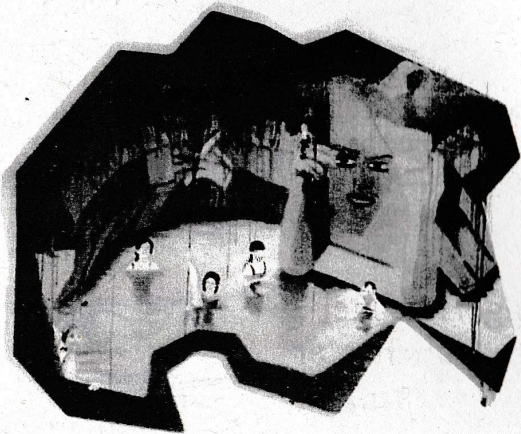
Bon voyage, Michael  
As I head to Manchester  
Icelandair waiting



Towards the end of 2015, as I wrapped things up as a full-time teacher in rural Lancashire, I inevitably began to have conversations with people about my decision to move, temporarily, to Iceland in the middle of the winter. Most questions were typically about the weather, specifically, the lack of daylight and the temperature. Rather than seeing the cold and the darkness as something negative however, these conversations helped me to become excited about new experiences - very short days, driving rain, snowdrifts and closed roads - all one big adventure, as far as I was concerned.

After a short flight, I arrived just after three in the afternoon, the sun having already set. I found myself in an elongated twilight period, which I was able to enjoy thanks to the fact that the plane I had been travelling on was parked a long way from any airport buildings. Apart from the lack of light, I also found myself confronting the weather earlier than I had expected and relished the opportunity to breathe in the freezing air as I walked down the metal steps towards the waiting bus that would carry my fellow passengers and I to the arrivals hall.

After clearing passport control, orienting myself and boarding a coach, I enjoyed an hour-long drive into downtown Reykjavík through endless fields of snow-covered solidified lava mounds, coloured toxic-yellow by the street lights which hung above. Later that day, after checking into my airbnb apartment and briefly unpacking (for I had two days in the



## HÓTEL BÍFKÍSI

capital before travelling north) I strolled around the streets and soon found the *Chuck Norris Bar and Grill* where I washed down a greasy over-priced burger with a can of *Appelsín* – a ubiquitous orange drink in Iceland.

The famous Icelandic winter darkness made its first big impression on me the following morning following a restless night in which fireworks were constantly being set-off. I treated myself to a longer period in bed than usual and so my alarm sounded at ten am. Eager to see this new



country with fresh eyes, I pulled back the curtains. There was total darkness. Excited, I had a shower, brushed my teeth, got dressed and set off in search of breakfast. As I strolled through the streets of the city, the snow crunching under my boots, the chill of the air biting my face, I peered up, amazed at the deep, deep blue hue of the sky at just before eleven in the morning and felt glad to be alive.

Not many hours later, after an Icelandic hotdog lunch near the port (a favourite of Bill Clinton) I headed to the nearest art shop to buy white spirit, turpentine and brush cleaning fluid, all of which are prohibited on-board planes. Leaving the shop a while later and with a generous discount applied to my purchases, the sun had once again set with the sky becoming rapidly darker. After another burger and glass of orange in a different burger joint (this one with only three tables), I headed back to the apartment and spent the evening chatting to my airbnb host and his Dutch cousin who were watching a programme about God, hosted by actor Morgan Freeman.

The next day I was more exposed to the all-consuming darkness to a greater extent, owing to the fact that I needed to catch a coach from an out-of-town bus station at nine in the morning. This meant a very early start in order to travel there, with plenty of time. Once there, after a very stressful hour of lugging cases, coats, bags and stretcher bars through the city streets and navigating an unknowably complex bus network, I bought my ticket and searched for an American artist who was also due to be travelling up north for the same residency. At first I couldn't see her (we'd never met before but had been in touch via a group email conversation) but I soon spotted a girl fast asleep on a



*Bill Clinton enjoying a hot dog.*

metal bench, wearing a pointy woollen hat with all her belongings shoved into a shopping trolley that was casually parked nearby. The only clue I had that it was her was the protruding array of sketchbooks and papers hanging from one side. Soon enough, someone shouted something in Icelandic and pointed to a large coach that was fitted with a host of enormous spotlights to the front - indicating the kind of terrain we'd soon be travelling through, the weather and the lack of daylight.

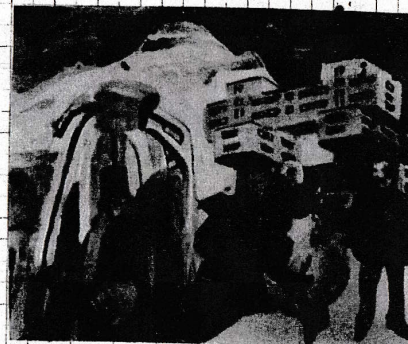
After waking her, awkwardly introducing myself and walking over to and boarding the coach we took our seats. For the next three hours, the coach wound its way firstly out of the suburbs of the city and gradually more and more into the icy wilderness. Periodically, it stopped at odd little settlements with strange sounding names, such as 'Bifröst' and 'Esjurætur Hiking Centre', all the while it being dark outside the window.

It was to this near-constant darkness that I became accustomed to over the first three months as, to begin with, days were three hours long and nights twenty-one hours.

However, far from being a negative effect of the Earth's tilt, it quickly became apparent that the darkness was something wonderful. The *Aurora Borealis* was visible for long stretches as were the stars of the Solar System. More than this, however, was the calm that always accompanied the darkness. The lights in the only bar in town and the Christmas lights that were left on the town lampposts provided a feeling of peace. Along the coast, in the far distance, the faint glimmer of a lighthouse could be seen and the multi-coloured light passing through the church's stained glass window was a joy to behold, impossible to appreciate during the daylight.

As winter now draws in and the days get shorter here in the UK, I have been reflecting on darkness and what darkness might mean in my painting. In my recent exhibition, *Poetic Trucks Flood*, at Husk Gallery in Limehouse I exhibited nine recent paintings, two of which were purposefully painted night time scenes: *Midnight* and *After Eight*. In

*My first painting in Iceland.*



*Fraser Crane meets Georgian architect meets Icelandic geography*

these paintings, it was my intention to convey the aforementioned sense of calm and of peace associated with darkness. Conversations took place during the exhibition run about the joy of the night - a time when business has been completed, when the stress of the day, with its endless list of jobs has been put to bed and when all one can do is sit back, contemplate and make plans. Perhaps it is this reason why conversations naturally become more reflective and the mood wistful.

Of all the paintings in my show, *Midnight* and *After Eight* were my two favourites. Of my three months in Iceland, January-with the shortest days- was my favourite. Perhaps it's time to paint more night-themed artworks? □



府中本町

Fuchū-Hommachi

武蔵野線



## Non-Stop Lobsters and Lancashire Horns

I have recently begun on the *Turps Banana Studio Programme*. Before I began this, I spent six months working as artist-in-residence at Husk Gallery in Limehouse. Further to all this, I attend meetings, discussions and a painter's book group along with Morphê Arts ([www.morphearts.org](http://www.morphearts.org)). All this has, joyfully, meant that my work has been intensively critiqued, probed, prodded, dissected, inverted, twisted and turned-over since I moved to London in May 2017. Moreover, it has called for me to try to figure out what I paint, what I'm interested in, why I paint and all the multitudes of questions behind everything I do in the studio.

This short text, therefore, is a written response to the constant questions generated by and about my work and a way for me to work out my paintings in a non-painterly way.

Things I'm interested in (in no particular order):

- Animals with segmented body parts (scorpions, lobsters, crabs)
- Cacti
- Brass bands
- Transport networks
- Architecture – Soviet Bus Stops
- Hot, geothermal pools
- The Eurovision Song Contest



The immediately apparent common element in all of the above is the concept of the repeating unit, interconnection and the decentralised whole. Let me begin at the top of the list. Animals with segmented body parts could, potentially, be repeated *ad infinitum* –the scorpion's tail, for example, could be made to resemble a scene from the mobile phone



game, *Snake*, in which each part of the snake's body is broken down into a segment and made from a group of pixels. In a similar way, a lobster could be visually broken down into its constituent parts and rebuilt. Body parts could be linked, legs extended and claws fused together in order to build a potentially limitless creature that has no end or beginning.

In my recent exhibition, *Poetic Trucks Flood* I showed my painting, *non-stop Cactus* in which a standard cactus was visually morphed by dint of the extension of its parts into a vast, knotted mass that, like the lobster, has no end or beginning. To paint this image, all I needed to know was the shape of the ends and the midsections – a series of repeating units.

In a similar way, transport networks don't really have ends or beginnings but are a series of interconnected repeated parts – i.e. stations, track, signals and platform. Even the trains themselves are made from and called 'multiple units'. Take Walthamstow Central for example – often referred to by Londoners as 'the end of the Victoria Line' and conversely by locals as 'the start of the Victoria Line'. Despite it being a linear line – it still has no beginning or end. Indeed, a line like this works effectively because of its links to other Underground lines, National and international rail connections, bus and coach links and myriad passenger walkways and tunnels. Furthermore, TFL's Victoria Line was originally designed in order to provide a link to the Northern Line, with 1/4 of its stations being interchanges between the two lines.

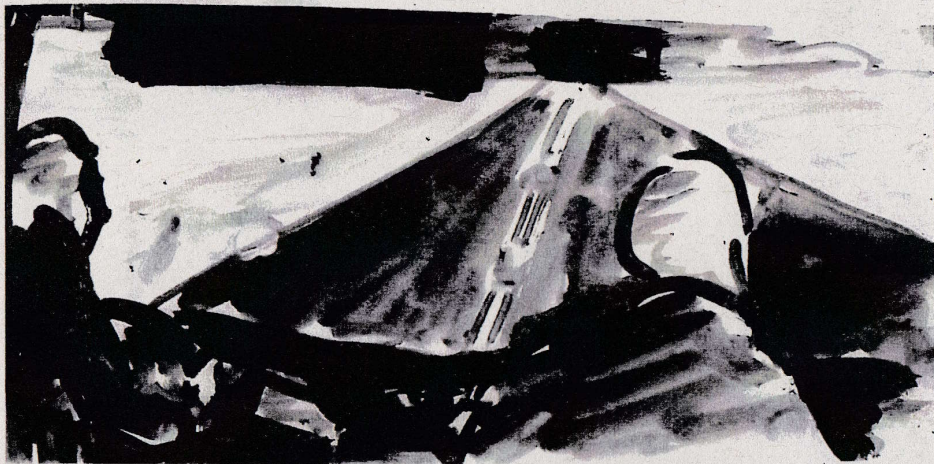
I have long been fascinated by brass instruments. I enjoy the sound of the brass ensemble, the proud history of the colliery band and its associated 'northernness' but more than this, I enjoy the visual complexity of the brass instrument (see the front cover of this Zine). In 2008, during my MFA, I invented the *Lancashire Horn* – an instrument made from dissected trumpet and tuba parts, soldered together with copper piping. Essentially all I needed were sections of pipe – corners and straight pieces along with parts of brass instruments such as the bell, the valves and the mouth piece.

My solo show, *Ten Years Too Late* at no format gallery in Deptford, London in April 2018 presented a series of paintings and sculptural paintings inspired by the book *Soviet Bus Stops*. This book highlighted the unusual, often outlandish and utopian 'minor architectural forms' found throughout the former Soviet Republic. Whilst each bus stop was very much designed to be a 'one off piece of architecture' it was inevitably always going to be connected to every other bus stop thanks to the fact that they exist to serve an interconnected network of buses.



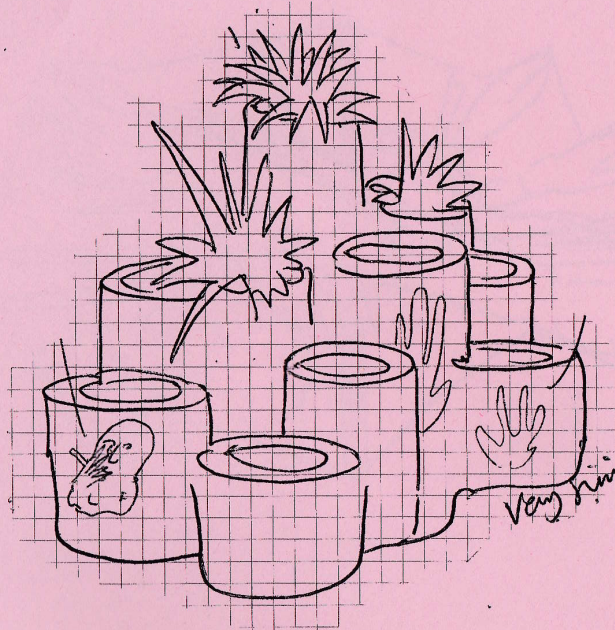
In a similar way, the work in my show was intended to be viewed as separate pieces, whilst also being part of an interconnected whole.

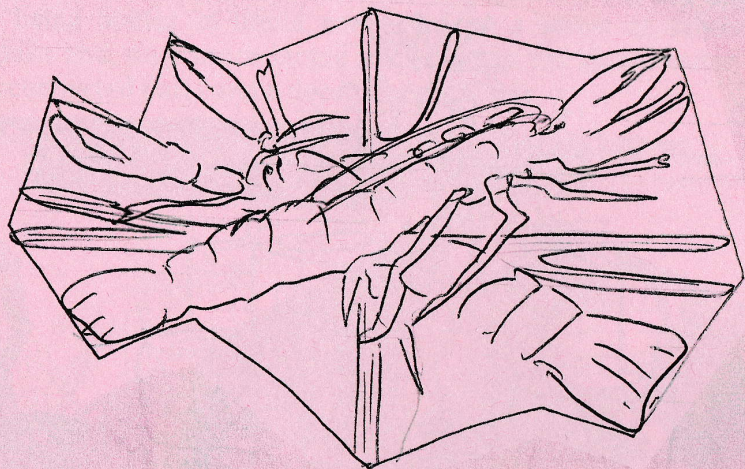
When I lived in Iceland, my favourite pastime was lounging in many of the numerous geothermal pools that fill the country. (Did you know that the Icelandic name for Saturday is 'Laugardagur' the name being derived from the old word laugr/laug meaning bath, thus meaning bathing-day?) In the nearest pool to where I lived, *Grettislaug*, which had a stony floor, you could find the very hot parts of the floor where the hot water bubbled up from deep in the Earth's crust. It has recently occurred to me that these pools work in a similar way to a city's sewer network - that being bodies of liquid connected by a series of subterranean conduits and, on a much larger scale, part of the global water cycle - interconnected parts and a decentralised whole.



Each May, my friends and I host a Eurovision party. Most fans are attracted to the famously poor pop music, the garish costumes, the saccharine hosts and the spectacle of watching neighbouring countries vote for one another. However, for me it's the yearly fascination of witnessing countries all over Europe watching the same live broadcast at the same time. The highlight being the part of the show where viewers in the disparate countries are collectively transported to the various capital cities of Europe to hear and see the scores being presented. Eurovision is a decentralised whole held together by an invisible and unknowable array of cables, satellites, switches, power stations, microphones and cameras in an extensive network.

There are, of course, many other signs and references that appear in my artworks which will bubble to the surface at some point and which are too numerous to mention here. It is also true that choices of colour, paint and painting substrate are key concerns of mine and issues that I am grappling with but that is a discussion for another time. □





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