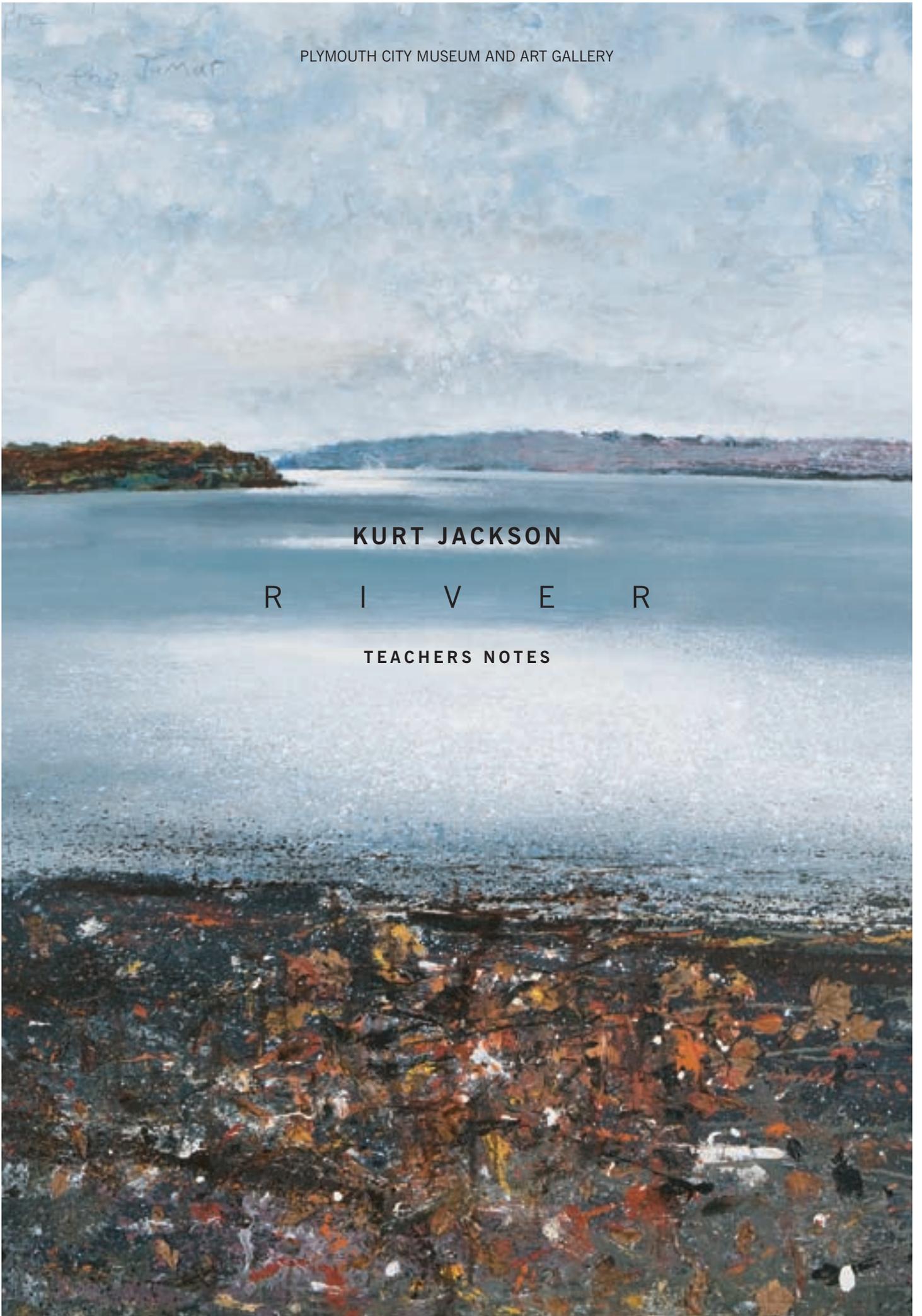


PLYMOUTH CITY MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

KURT JACKSON

R I V E R

TEACHERS NOTES





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# INTRODUCTION

These notes have been written to complement Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery's exhibition **River: Kurt Jackson** (27 March to 10 July 2010).

The aim of these notes is to provide a way to look at and learn from the paintings included in the exhibition.

It can also support a visit to the exhibition, or can be adapted for use in the classroom.

We are able to tailor sessions to meet your needs. You are also able to visit the exhibition as a self-guided group. Please book all visits in advance by emailing [museumvisits@plymouth.gov.uk](mailto:museumvisits@plymouth.gov.uk). Please have a selection of dates available when contacting us.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTIST

Kurt Jackson is one of Britain's leading painters. Born in Dorset in 1961, he studied zoology at Oxford University, but also began to draw and paint while at university. Today, his work embraces an extensive range of materials and techniques including mixed media, large canvases, relief work, print making and sculpture. Kurt Jackson now lives and works in the far west of Cornwall.

Whether working in Cornwall, another part of the country, or abroad, his paintings are set in places that have been travelled to and explored regularly through out his life. They are seen through the eyes of an artist with a deep and rich understanding of natural history and ecology, politics and environmental issues; maybe recording a time and place and a way of life.

In his own words, he says:

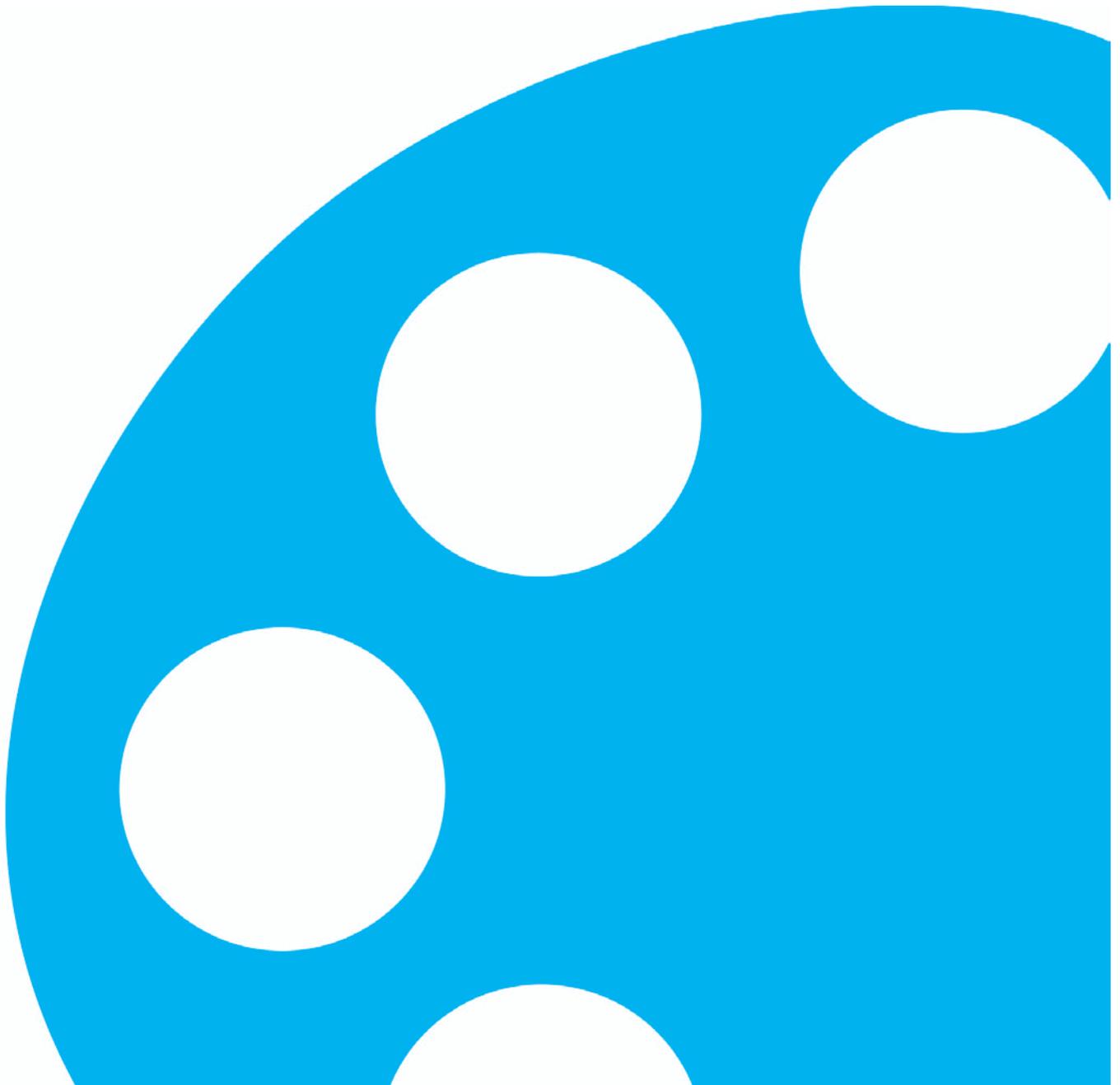
*"In Cornwall my subjects are mostly places I know well, that I visit over and over again - certain areas of coast, moorland and valleys. I tend to work on projects, usually over a year, which are based on a particular aspect of Cornish culture or a distinct tract of countryside. Capturing a fleeting impression doesn't interest me. In all my paintings the aim is to convey my feelings and sense of awareness in that particular environment".*

# PAINTINGS AND IDEAS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Many of the paintings and drawings within the exhibition relate directly to the River Tamar, its physical environment - the flowing water, trees and bushes, buildings or bridges, or the wildlife that lives in or around the river.

Some paintings may contain more than meets the eye - if you like closely you are likely to spot leaves, sand, mud, feathers - even the occasional plastic bottle!

Some paintings have words written into the paint - either below a layer of paint, scratched into the paint, or over the top of a finished painting as a way of describing what was happening during the process of making a painting. You may notice the names of places along riverbanks, names of birds, amphibians or plants that he may have noticed, or the names of people that stopped to talk to him while working, or parts of the conversations they may have had.

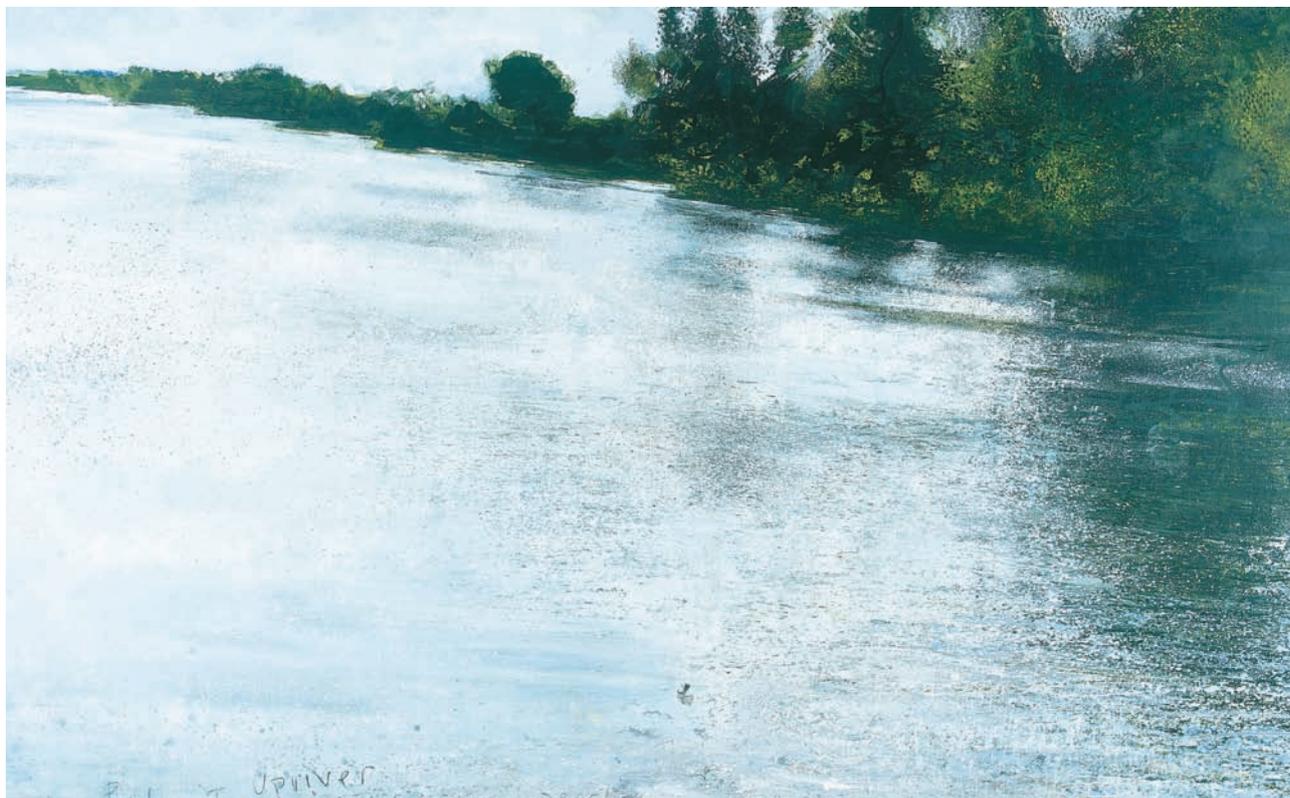


# PAINTINGS AND IDEAS FOR THE CLASSROOM

## Upriver

202 x 302 cm

Mixed media on canvas



The painting *Up River* is based on a stretch of the River Thames. The artist usually works within different 'projects' - this painting being part of 'The Thames Project'.

The painting is very large. The main elements of the painting are shown as either being very light, or very dark, and so the painting can be described as being 'tonal'.

The paint has been applied in a number of ways - using a brush directly onto the canvas, using something other than a brush (maybe the artist's hands or fingers), and being flicked onto the canvas from a brush, stick or something similar. Look closely - you may be able to spot other ways in which the artist has made his marks.

Written on the canvas are various words that describe what was happening on the river while making the painting:

*Upriver,*  
*Empty River,*  
*Peter Jones catches a perch,*  
*Thames,*  
*The world slides by*

## ACTIVITIES

- } **The trees on the river bank cast a shadow onto the water, shown as reflections: Where would the sun have to have been to make these shadows? Behind the artist or behind the trees?**
- } **Would the sun be rising or setting, or high in the sky to cause these reflections?**
- } **Take your class to a natural area, away from roads or the hustle and bustle of a city. It doesn't have to be near a river. Ask your class to write down some words that describe the events that happen during your visit. They could relate to sounds that you hear, things that you see, or emotions that you feel during your visit.**

# PAINTINGS AND IDEAS FOR THE CLASSROOM

**Winter Avon, Lacock**  
2005/2006.  
196.9 x 332.5 cm  
*Mixed media on linen*



The painting Winter Avon. Lacock is based on a stretch of the River Avon near to Chippenham in Wiltshire. The painting is part of the 'Avon' series.

Again, this painting is very large. Both banks of the river are shown in this painting, with the river curving its way around into the distance on the right-hand side of the canvas. In the top left corner you can see fields and trees on the horizon. Again, the paint has been applied to the canvas in a number of different ways. On this painting in particular, the oil paint has been applied using a palette knife or some other flat object, making areas of the painting quite thick. The artist also seems to have wiped off some of the paint with a rag, or at least smeared the paint across the canvas using something other than a brush. There are also drips of thin paint and flicked paint across the whole surface of the painting.

Written on the canvas are various words that describe what was happening on the river while making the painting:  
*A strong breeze blows dry leaves across the canvas,  
The long tailed tits visit, A chaffinch sounds randy,  
Farm smells in the air, The river is quiet*

## ACTIVITIES

- } **Try making a painting outside on a very large piece of paper using large brushes and very thinned-down paint, and very thick paint. Try a roll of wallpaper. It may need more than one pupil to work on the same painting, and it will definitely require aprons, or clothes you can get messy!**
- } **How difficult is it for you to control both the thick paint, and the very thin dripping paint?**
- } **Try flicking the paint with your brush to make similar marks to those made by Kurt Jackson - how much control do you have over the paint?**
- } **How difficult is it to paint a large picture outside?**

# PAINTINGS AND IDEAS FOR THE CLASSROOM

**Oak leaves fall, distant traffic, gulls visit, the tide ebbs on the Tamar**

2007

167 x 200 cm

*Oil and collage on linen*



The painting *Oak leaves fall, distant traffic, gulls visit, the tide ebbs on the Tamar* is based on a stretch of the River Tamar. The painting is part of the 'Tamar' series.

The painting is again very large, though not as large as the previous two we have focussed upon. The painting shows what appears to be a mud shoreline in the foreground, looking out towards a river bank on the left, the other river bank in the distance on the right hand-side, and, if you look closely - the Tamar bridge. It is difficult to make out, but it appears the Tamar road bridge is in front of the Royal Albert Bridge (Brunel's bridge), meaning this view would have been painted from the Devon bank of the Tamar, looking towards Saltash and Cornwall.

The painting is again made using a combination of thick, smeared paint, and thin paint that has been flicked onto the canvas. There is also sand and mud mixed into the paint in some areas, making a gritty surface over which the artist has painted, and also some oak leaves have either blown onto the wet paint or the artist has applied them to the surface.

The title of the painting is taken from the words written onto the canvas in the top left corner:

*Oak leaves fall, Distant traffic, Gulls visit,  
The tide ebbs on the Tamar*

## ACTIVITIES

- } **Try mixing sand or mud into your paint when making a painting. Does this make the paint feel different when you use it?**
- } **Why not try making paint solely from mud? The 'earth colours' - sienna, umber and ochre - are still made from pigment sourced from soil. Our soil in Plymouth won't be as good quality as these artists' materials, but why not try? Dry the soil and grind into a powder. You can try mixing this with water and a little PVA glue to bind the paint together.**
- } **Artist's pigments sometimes come from very strange sources, for example 'Mummy Brown'. This was made by colourmen grinding human and animal mummies with other materials to make a very dark brown colour. Why not create a chart for the classroom wall of different pigments, and find out where those pigments have come from. This is great for cross-curricular art and science work, as many will have come from minerals or other natural sources.**

# THE WATER CYCLE

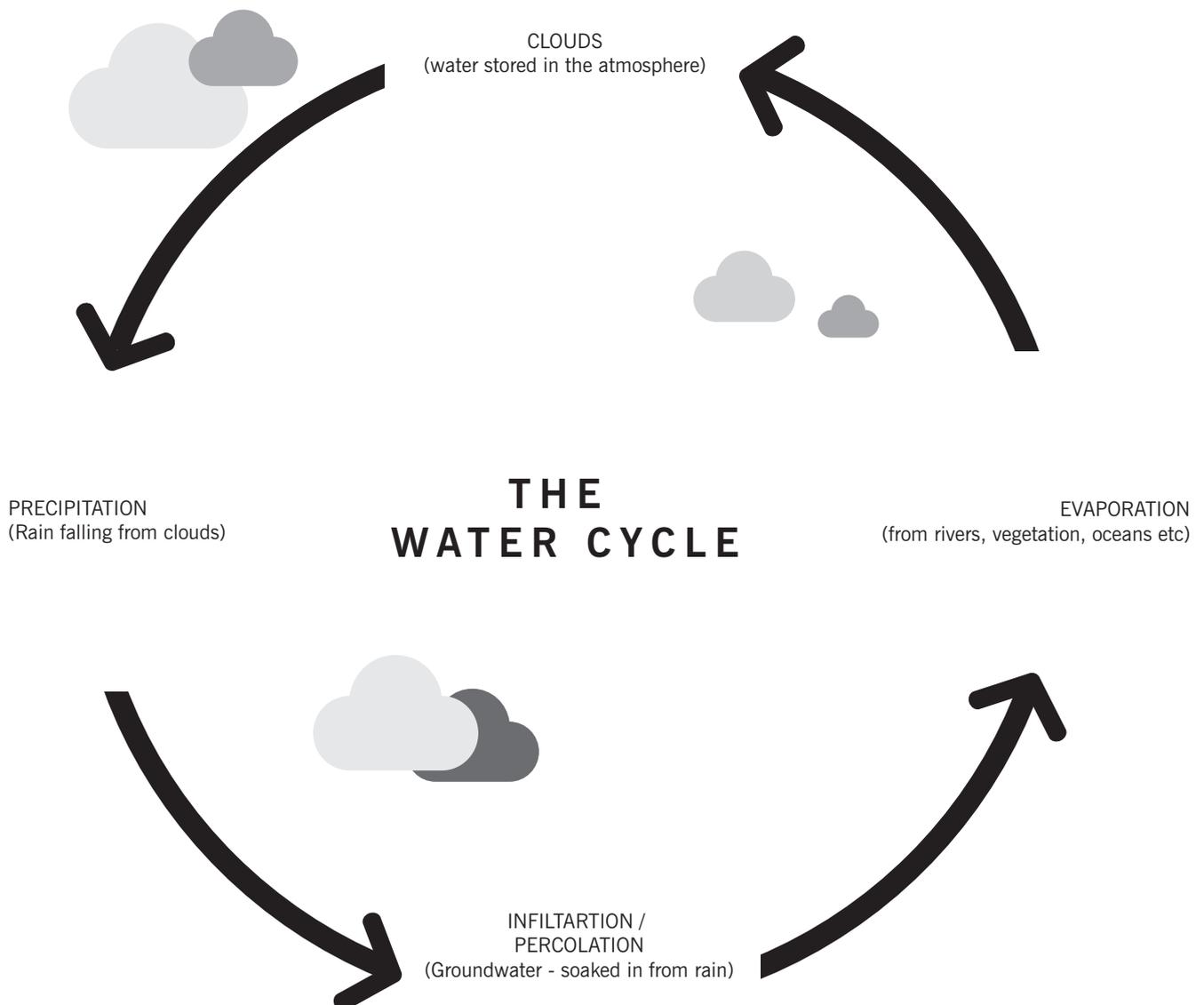
Rivers, tributaries, streams, creeks, brooks, rivulets - all these different names are used for natural watercourses - usually freshwater - that flow towards an ocean, a lake, a sea, or another river. Generally, larger watercourses are called rivers, while smaller ones are often called by the other names, sometimes these are even specific to the area where you live, such as 'burns' in certain areas of Scotland.

Rivers are a major part of the water cycle, or if you want to get really technical - the Hydrologic Cycle. This cycle describes the continuous movement of water above, on, and below the surface of the Earth.

The movement of water never stops - so just because your bath water empties down a pipe towards a treatment plant - that isn't the end of the story. That water will gradually work its way through the cycle, and may well end up back in your bath one day!

Many different processes are involved in the water cycle - you should be able to spot these on this diagram below.

There are many other ways for water to move, including snow-melt, outlets from natural springs, geysers, and also natural surface run-off after heavy rain. Try and search for some of the more technical processes on the internet.



# RIVER PAINTINGS, POETRY AND OTHER ARTWORK

Rivers have long been a source of inspiration for artists, writers and poets.

Artists such as **Bryan Wynter**, who was also based in Cornwall, used rivers as a source for some of his work. His painting *Pas* can currently be seen in our South Gallery as part of an exhibition called 'Artists from St Ives and the South West'. *Pas* is the name of a river in the region of Cantabria in northern Spain.

## ACTIVITIES

- } **Compare the painting *Pas* (1970) by Bryan Wynter with any of the paintings by Kurt Jackson - can you find any similarities between the two artists, or their method of working?**
- } **Hints and tips - try looking at this [resource](#) for more information about Bryan Wynter.**

Another artist whose work has occasionally been based on rivers is **Richard Long**. His work takes many forms - sculptural, landscape-based work that uses the natural materials that surround him, gallery-based wall paintings and sculptures using natural materials such as rocks and mud, and text based work that sometimes relates to photographs he has taken of his sculptural work, and sometimes are just the words themselves.

## ACTIVITIES

- } **Compare the textworks *Walking with the Rivers Roar* (1983) or *Watershed* (1992), and the sculpture *River Po Line* (2002) with a painting by Kurt Jackson. How do these artists use words in the work? Compare the different materials the artists use - can you find any similarities?**
- } **Hints and tips - try looking at Richard Long's [website](#) for some of his work**

# RIVER PAINTINGS, POETRY AND OTHER ARTWORK

The poet **Ted Hughes** published a book of poetry called *River* in 1983. The poems are set alongside photographs which may or may not relate to the poems. He lived near to the River Taw in North Devon, and many of the poems included in *River* are surely influenced by this location. As well as being well known for marrying the American poet Sylvia Plath, and for being Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death in 1998, Ted Hughes was also a keen fisherman and wrote on the subject of fishing many times.

Included in the book *River* is one of Ted Hughes most famous poems - *An October Salmon*. This long poem uses the idea of salmon swimming upstream as a metaphor of the difficulties faced in life. The poem describes the movement of salmon (both a male and a female) from the sea to a river, to find a place to reproduce. The poem also continually refers to the passing of time, inferring the short lives of the salmon.

*Yet this was always with him. This was inscribed in his egg.  
This chamber of horrors is also home.  
He was probably hatched in this very pool.*

*And this was the only mother he ever had,  
this uneasy channel of minnows  
Under the mill-wall, with bicycle wheels, car-tyres, bottles  
And sunk sheets of corrugated iron.  
People walking their dogs trail their evening shadows  
across him.  
If boys see him they try to kill him.*

## ACTIVITIES

- } Try writing poetry from the viewpoint of a creature that would live in a river. What kind of things would be in the poem? Are all rivers serene environments without pollution, or untouched by human hands? What kind of things do we subject the creatures living in our rivers to everyday?
- } After writing poems, why not try illustrating them? Remember, you don't necessarily have to illustrate everything that happens in the poem!

The musician **Nick Drake** wrote a song called *River Man*, released on his album 'Five Leaves Left' in 1969. The song describes wanting to visit the 'river man' so the narrator can have a conversation with him about the things occurring in his life:

*Gonna see the river man  
Gonna tell him all I can  
'bout the ban  
On feeling free.  
If he tells me all he knows  
About the way his river flows  
I don't suppose  
It's meant for me*

The song itself sounds very simple on first listen. Listen again, and you'll notice how the guitar playing and singing overlap, and how the orchestral accompaniment occasionally plays a different pattern to the guitar playing and singing. This is due to Drake playing the song in 5/4 time, which adds to the 'spilling over' or 'overlapping' effect, which in turn gives the song its 'riverine' quality of flowing motion, slow and steady movement - a river of sound.

## ACTIVITIES

- } Listen to the song *River Man* while making drawings or paintings in the classroom. Ask the children to try and reflect the mood of the song in their work - what colours would be suitable for expressing the song in paint?
- } Can you think of any other pieces of music that sound 'river-like'?

# CHARITIES

Shirehampton sandpipers, stillness (detail)

2008

152 x 198 cm approx

Mixed media & collage on linen



Kurt Jackson is associated with many charities that aim to help wildlife and the environment.

One of the most well known of these charities is **Greenpeace**. They aim to “investigate, expose, and confront environmental abuse by governments and corporations around the world” by taking direct action. You can see a video, called Bass, of Kurt Jackson leaving Plymouth on a RIB to board the Greenpeace ship ‘Esperanza’ in the ‘film’ section of his **personal website**. The aim of trip was for Jackson to record the actions of Greenpeace activists in their attempts to disrupt pair trawlers fishing for bass off the South-West coast.

Jackson is also associated with **Friends of the Earth**. Friends of the Earth seek to influence our government and governments world-wide, to make changes to policies in favour of people and our planet. You can see a video called **Friends of the Earth Meets Kurt Jackson** on **their website**. The video contains strong language, so please watch this and make your own judgement before showing to your class. Jackson has previously donated his earnings from two paintings to the charity, and has been a member since a very young age.

**WaterAid** is another charity to benefit from Jackson’s generosity - “Our mission is to overcome poverty by enabling the world’s poorest people to gain access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene education.”

As Artist-in-Residence at the Glastonbury Festival since 1999, Jackson produces large numbers of drawings and paintings during the event, and each year most of the work is auctioned off with the proceeds being given to the festivals’ nominated charity. In 2009, over £29,000 was given to WaterAid. The donation rotates each year to the three main charities involved with Glastonbury, WaterAid, Greenpeace and Oxfam.

In 2008, Jackson sold two pieces of work from an exhibition in Cornwall, and donated the £4000 proceeds to the **Cornwall Wildlife Trust**. The trust own and maintain the Kingsmill Lake Reserve on the Cornish bank of the River Tamar - the first place Jackson saw the elusive avocet in Cornwall.

# OTHER IDEAS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Kurt Jackson doesn't just paint views when making his paintings - often descriptive words are added to the surface of his paintings, or paintings are made on scraps of newspaper or other printed material that are collected in the local area.

## CONCRETE POETRY

The idea of concrete poetry is to arrange words on your page so that this arrangement itself conveys the subject of your poem, rather than relying on rhyme or rhythm.

Choose some key words that relate to rivers for the class to use. Some examples include:

Source, Flow, Meander, Confluence, Velocity, Erosion

Ask your class to create two concrete poems - one for the Tamar and one for the Plym - by adding a few of their own descriptive words to this list. Remember that the placement of words on a page is just as important as the actual words themselves, so encourage your children to be creative. This can be done either with pencils and paper, crayons through wet paint, or simply on a computer using different fonts.

## RIVER DIARIES

When in an environment making his paintings, Kurt Jackson also fills sketchbooks full of drawings - snippets, fragments, sketches of scenes. Some of these will be on display in our balcony display cases.

If possible, try and visit a river for a school trip and make a river diary consisting of drawings, writing, and photographs. Why not combine a morning visiting the exhibition with an afternoon drawing by a river? If a trip to a river is not possible, why not make a diary of an imaginary week on the river?

What different animals would you see? How many fish have jumped out of the water to catch flies? How many different types of tree can you find? Do the reflections in the river look different during different parts of the day? How does the river change from source to sea?

## RIVER SOUNDS AND PERFORMANCE

Using voices, instruments, found objects and sound recording software, try and soundtrack the river environment. Think of the different things that happen everyday on the river - fishermen talking to one another, boats travelling up and down, fish swimming, deer drinking, crabs scuttling, trees being blown in the wind. Think of our own River Tamar - everything from fly-fishing to nuclear submarines.

Why not include your concrete poems in your sound recording, or perform it at a school assembly?

## RECYCLE, RE-USE, RE-CREATE

Kurt Jackson occasionally uses found objects on his paintings, and frequently uses them to create assemblages and sculptures to display alongside his paintings.

Using found objects from the natural world, such as feathers, shells, twigs, leaves, seaweed, rocks etc, create sculptures or assemblages that describe the environment.

Ask your children to collect shoe boxes so that their assemblages can be displayed on the wall, or use them as a plinth for free standing sculptures.

## ETHICAL DEBATE

As Kurt Jackson is a keen supporter of different ethical and environmental charities, why not set up a debate in the classroom?

Set up two opposing arguments on, for example, pollution in our rivers vs industrial development. Ask the pupils to research their side of the argument, and then debate the points raised in the classroom.

You could also use the internet to find images for a PowerPoint presentation for each side of the argument.

# PLYMOUTH CITY MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

10am to 5pm Tuesday to Friday

10am to 5pm Saturdays and Bank Holiday Mondays

Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AJ

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[www.plymouthmuseum.gov.uk](http://www.plymouthmuseum.gov.uk)

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/plymouthmuseums/>

