

South West Peatland Partnership

Using stories, sound and imagery to explore the past, present and futures of peatlands across Exmoor, Dartmoor and Cornwall.

Justine Read

Bringing peatlands to life

Remote, inaccessible, and with much of their treasures out of sight, sharing the importance of peatlands and the impact of human activity on these spaces can be challenging.

It's vital, however, to rise to this challenge and find innovative ways to engage local audiences with these landscapes. How they have been, and continue to be, shaped and changed over thousands of years into what we see today. To impress on others the need for holistic and bold peatland restoration if we are to not only bring about climate, ecological and hydrological benefits, but also to preserve the vital past and ever-present cultural intricacies of peatlands.

STACKS: The artwork

STACKS is an audiovisual exploration of the past, present and futures of three peatlands: Bodmin Moor, Dartmoor and Exmoor. Produced by Rose Ferraby, Tommy Perman and Rob St John between 2021 and 2023, it was commissioned by the South West Peatland Partnership.

STACKS was created to explore the way people and nature interact in peatland landscapes; constantly archiving, altering and adapting across scales both tiny and vast.

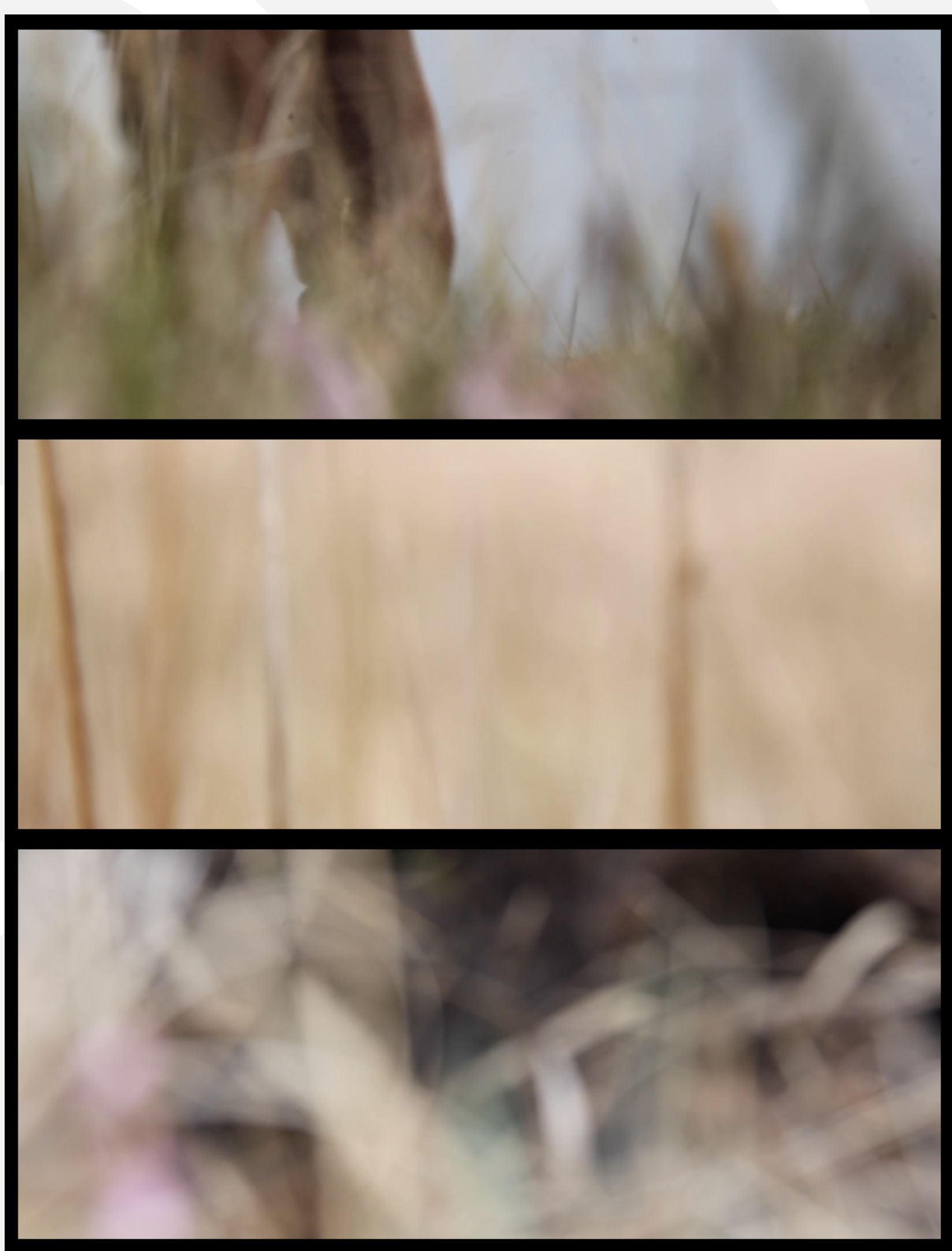


Figure 1: an example of the interactive windows on the STACKS website

The process

On the STACKS website, three interactive film windows run alongside an 18-minute sound piece exploring key issues in peatland landscapes across the UK's south west.

Different methods were used to capture visuals for the project. 35mm films of peatland landscapes were taken and then buried in the undeveloped film canisters deep into moortop peat bog and mires for six months before being developed. Immersion in the bog had left organic traces on many of the films – whorls, bubbles, curving lines – and had disintegrated all, or part, of others, leaving patterns of absence and light flare. These films were then sliced into tiny segments and animated. The resulting films are bursts of colour and pattern from the bog.

'It's sometimes hard to conjure the invisible worlds that exist beneath the surface of a peatland. Through their dark, wet layers we can see into the past. Peatlands reveal vast environmental changes. They hold archives of changing relationships between humans and the land. In their rich layers we can trace a gathering of the microscopic and the global.'

-an excerpt from STACKS spoken by Rose Ferraby

A variety of different microphones were used to experiment with recording sound in and around peatlands. Firstly to record traces of life above and below the bog, and secondly to create a sonic palette with which to compose accompanying music. Sounds from the hydrophones, contact microphones and stereo microphones were variously stretched, pitched, granulated and decomposed to create new rhythms, drones and melodies.

These abstractions of the peatlands were woven with field recordings of bird calls and vegetation moving in the wind. The resulting soundscape was then overlaid with voices of people who live and work in these unique habitats, delving into the rich histories and complex natures of these landscapes. The voices are drawn from environmental managers, peatland restoration officers, landscape archaeologists and poets to form an experimental 'radio play' tuning into the peat. Archive recordings of local people from The Dartmoor Trust Archive trace the extraction and use of peat through the 20th Century.

'In peatland pools, [hydrophones] detected the buzzing stridulations of underwater insects: remarkable sounds generated by the animals rubbing their back legs together at rapid speeds. In deep sphagnum moss, they recorded ebbing and flowing crackles as water bubbles coalesced and popped.'

- Rob St John on the process of recording STACKS sounds

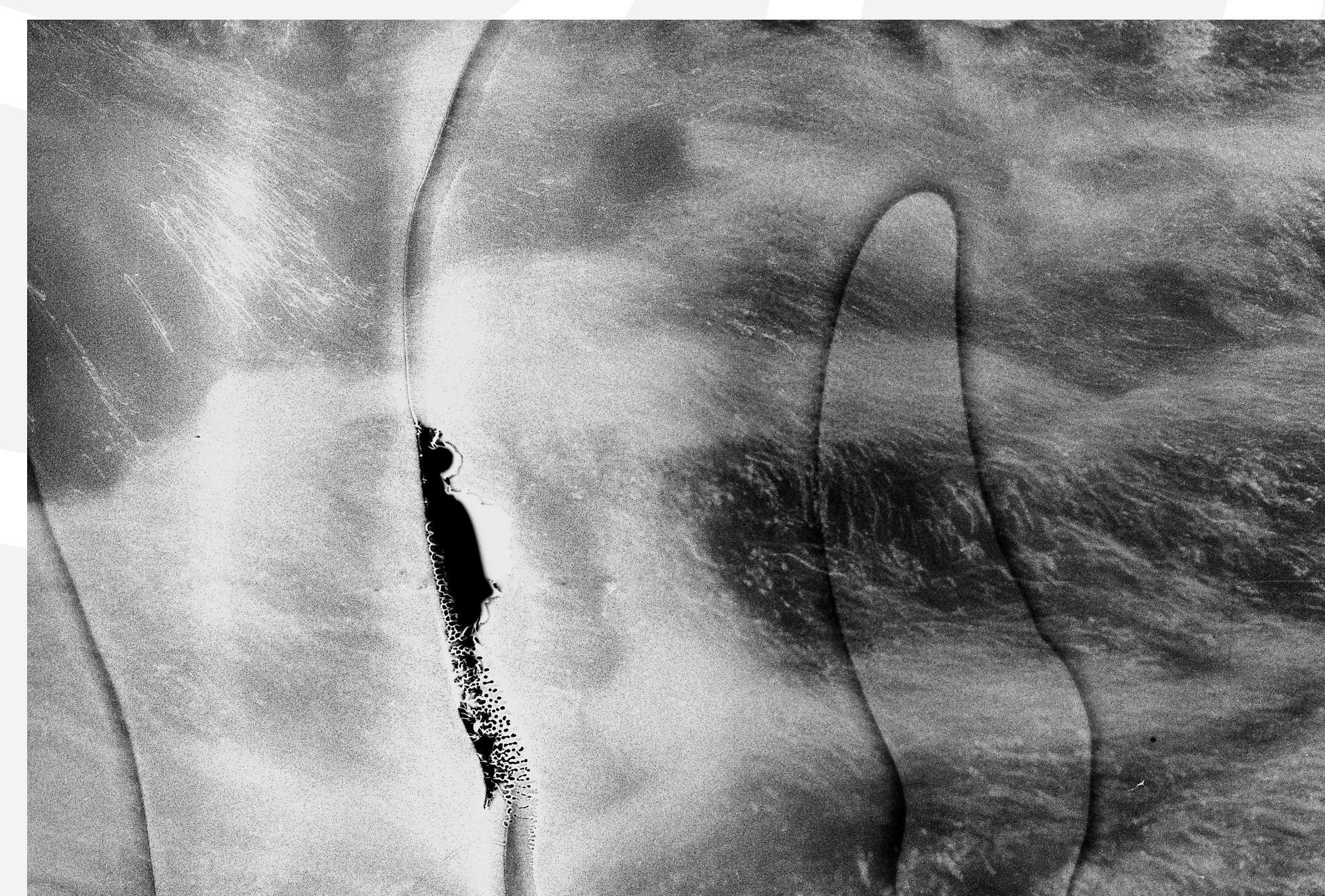


Figure 2: 35mm film buried in peatland before animated in STACKS credit: Rob St John

The artists

Rose Ferraby, Tommy Perman and Rob St John are award-winning artists whose creative practice are informed by their transdisciplinary experience in archaeology, ecology, music and design. Their collaboration draws on shared skills in sound, visual art, sculpture and digital media, resulting in innovative and attentive responses to site and museum based commissions.

Visitors to the STACKS website can shuffle and curate their own visual landscapes from dozens of the films made by Rose, Tommy and Rob. Their hope is that the varied textures, colours and patterns unearthed help celebrate peatlands as much more than bleak, damp landscapes which are inhospitable to people, and that, watched alongside the sound piece, the work helps spark new curiosity about these rich and remarkable places.

STACKS has had coverage on BBC Radio 3, InkCap Journal, Dartmoor Collective and Caught by the River. Rose, Rob and Tommy have produced a 50 minute podcast discussing peatland landscapes, their work in the project, and the role of art in addressing big environmental issues. Listen on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or Amazon Music.



peatstacks.uk

