



# **Navigations of Iron**

## **Gary Blundell**

**Originally exhibited by the Agnes Jamieson Gallery  
August 12—September 26, 2020, Minden, Ontario**



# Navigations of Iron

**Agnes Jamieson Gallery**

Curated by Laurie Carmount  
with assistance from Chris Hanson

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A hike to iron mining sites in the Irondale area accompanied the exhibition. The hike was co-hosted by local historian Guy Scott and conceived/organized by Gary Blundell.

Catalogue created by Victoria Ward for [hotspurstudio.com](http://hotspurstudio.com)  
@hotspurstudio Thank you to Andy Parks

*Victoria Adit*, gouache & pencil on paper, 22x12", 2020 (created after public hike)

# The Victoria Warder

From the 1870s through the 1890s, small communities around Snowden Township including Irondale, Howland Junction and the Burnt River were explored and mined for iron. This resource was then used to build the early railroads in Haliburton County along with many other items now found in the collections of museums in Haliburton and Minden. Some of the iron was also shipped to the United States.

In 1880, Charles Pusey, originally from Pennsylvania moved to Ontario via New York City and formed the Toronto Iron Company. He owned 35,000 acres of land from Snowden to Cardiff, built a smelter at Furnace Falls and started work on the IB&O Railway that he hoped would reach Ottawa. There are a lot of good stories about his efforts, many silver-screen worthy, but they were largely for naught as the smelter burned down and the railroad was never quite completed. Regardless, the church in Irondale, the village of Wilberforce and many other settlements came into existence because of his efforts. He died and was buried in Brooklyn in 1899.

The efforts to collect the iron are still apparent. Open pit mine sites and mining test holes can still be found in the ground. The remains of abandoned kilns and neglected rail road buildings and tracks and culverts can still be seen throughout the forests of Highlands East and Minden Hills. Nature has taken much of these interruptions in the landscape back into its fold. Historically where Europe has castles, Asia has temples and fortresses, and Africa has sites like the pyramids, rural Canada has an Indigenous tradition. In terms of European settlement however our history here is solely resource based and industrial. With all Industry came culture, religion, economics and politics. Our recent history is about resources, and with that it's indelible shaping of who we are and have become.



IB&O CN Howland Junction



**I**n **Navigations of Iron**, Gary Blundell makes the iron ore a navigable idea; an effort toward modernity and a manifestation of the poetic in our desires. Blundell has long investigated landscapes used and re-imagined by our industrial endeavours.

**I**n 2001, at a residency in Iceland, he was struck by how much the volcanic scarring of the surface there seemed similar to the remains of pre-smelting roast yards in the Sudbury area created by mining extraction efforts around a hundred years ago. In France and England, he found white chalk quarries, used as a surface by prehistoric artists and mined by the Roman Empire for their coliseums, and cliffs that have had an indelible mark on local history, culture and mythology throughout Europe. Britain was first seen as a white strip of promise across the channel from France, sparking an aesthetic that the country has embraced and reveled in for centuries; that of a white, noble, God-like destiny. Chalk caves were also used to hide many of the world's greatest art works during World War II.

***Mining transforms our  
landscapes and changes our  
relationships to them.***

**I**n 2011, Blundell visited Yorkshire, England to document the centuries old coal industry. All of the mines are now shuttered but before these closed, he was able to visit the last working mine. Coal is black and dirty and yet its energy became a force that would finance England's dominance in the world. The chalk cliffs in England's south are an extraordinary contrast to the coal and Gary has come to believe that these geological formations are both intrinsic to the character of the British people. The island's landscape has embedded in it all manner of ways that its culture has evolved including stark aesthetic differences (black and white) and economic inequality (north – poor, south – rich).

**H**ere in Canada, our resources are in places like the Haliburton area, far from cities or large populations. Thus, most of our population's relationship to them has always been abstract. Blundell's work, steeped in ideas of transformation and liminal moments, tries to convey the ongoing collision of humanity and the natural world. With **Navigations of Iron**, he has brought together his ongoing thesis, historic and archival research, along with fieldwork in the visiting of sites throughout the Irondale area. This project really began in 2013 when the Municipality of Highlands East hired him to create a summary of mining sites for their cultural planning process. Since then Blundell has used all his extensive research for this exhibition.

Written by Victoria Ward in homage to the actual newspaper from the 1890s in the Irondale/Kinmount area called *The Victoria Warder*.



*Howland Junction Pit No. 2, oil on carved wood, 40x42" 2019*

***“he went there to finger the strike/slip  
fissure between rock and stone between Vivaldi’s  
waterfall and the wavering note a varied thrush  
sets on a shelf of air.”***

From poem ‘Loss Creek’ by Don McKay  
McClelland and Stewart, 2006

Release the soundings, as the body/flesh of all this earth vibrates through me. That is what it feels like to wander through the sheer force of all this rock. An embodied time-piece stretches beyond the measure of a single life. So many seasons spent in this Precambrian Shield and I feel grounded here amongst all this scared earth shaped by lava, glaciers, water flow and human forging. Geology and human contact with the earth map a wonderment of historical, scientific, artistic and philosophical enterprise. Our understanding of our place on earth involves mapping the natural phenomena of glacier flow, carving whole landforms, or, the unearthing of fossils and markings revealing the churned up encrustations of lava activity.

Scientific journaling and artistic recording is indeed a part of the canon, as the remarkable journeys of Alexander von Humboldt so beautifully illustrates. There is also a sense of conscience as he traveled the earth not only aware of its’ natural history but acutely aware of so many layers of land and human exploitation. This is a journey that never ends as we move into the 21st century.

There is much to witness of what exists now and what has been a part of our experiences of the landscape.

Gary Blundell is not only a painter but a geologist. His is a richly layered practice that mirrors the powerful dialogue between earth, humanity, and the universe. The ability to infuse both topographical knowledge with the action of painting is the guiding force so apparent in Blundell’s aesthetic. One feels deeply the total experience of body, mind and gestural muscle in his work.

*“I see a through-line from the edges of the universe, to the surface of the Earth, to the cells that we are made of. Natural structures are built and demolished causing endless patterning. Humans build and destroy creating the pattern of civilization. My paintings begin with and are about my relationship with these patterns. “*

- Gary Blundell

(continued)





*Crested*, oil on carved wood, 41x42" 2019

(essay continued)

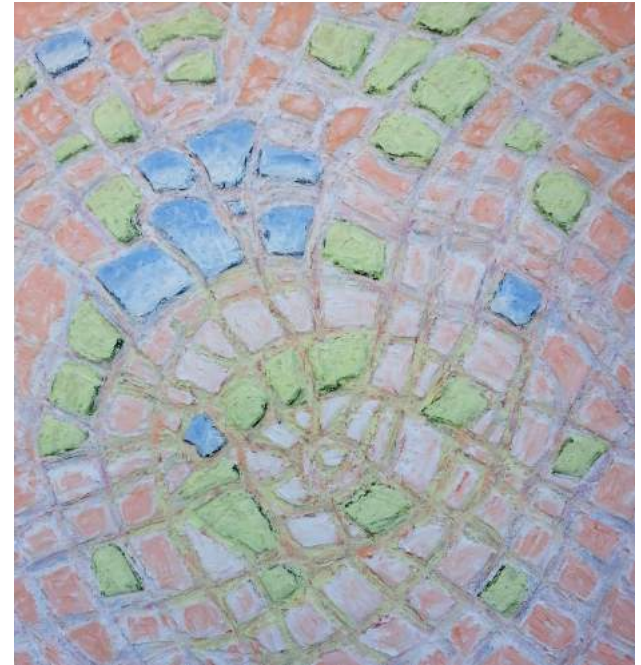
Cutting into, warping painted surfaces - gauging (routering) grid lines, harnesses the rhythms of the earth. These actions create the viewers visual entry into the work. Riemannian displacements allow each depicted mine pit image to take you deep into the terrain, or, push you outwards into space. In Blundell's paintings, such spatial illusions are part of his mastery. He sets the ground of the painting surface in motion taking us in, ever in, toward geologic actions, mnemonic and sensorially riveting.

Entering the main gallery I was struck not only by the powerful surfaces of the paintings but also the flesh-like hues of the colour palette in a number of the pieces. Upon reflection, I felt my body more and more drawn into these subtle hues. I simultaneously sensed a correlation between his mine pit forms and bodily organs. The language of paint here startled in its' ability to excavate not only the earth's geologic field but also the scarring left behind by pit mining. We are after-all living in the era of the Anthropocene, never as consciously aware of how much we as humanity have changed the earth.

We become part of the earth's welfare or current demise as we know it. The bodied-ness present in the painted and scored surfaces allows for the abstract infolding of the landscape. Our bodies and the earth's rocky surfaces are as one in a gestalt experience layered into the geologic processes envisioned. Mining for iron is a historical event in this Cambrian shield area, re-witnessed by Blundell and given back, not just historically, as place, but as a deeply human experience of how much we are a part of this terra inferna.

Maralynn Cherry, curator/artist,  
former curator of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington





*Off Cleveland, Leaving, Debris* each oil on carved wood, each 32x34" 2019/20





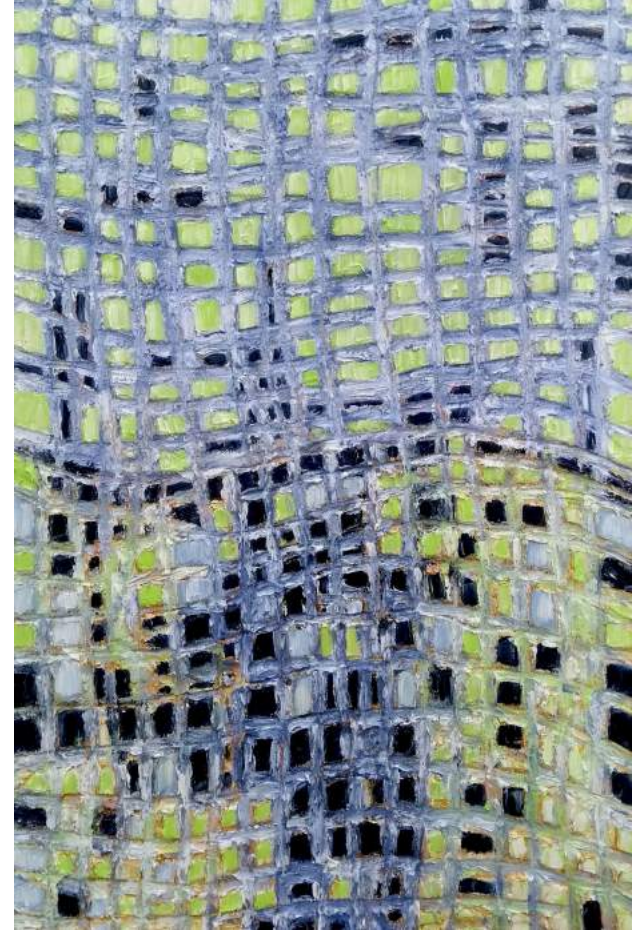
*Victoria Pit*, oil on carved wood, 40x42" 2020





*Victoria Long Pit*, oil on carved wood, 42x40" 2020





*The Yearning Triptych, Eternal Stumble, Moon Atlas, Accumulation*, each oil on carved wood, each 36x24" 2019





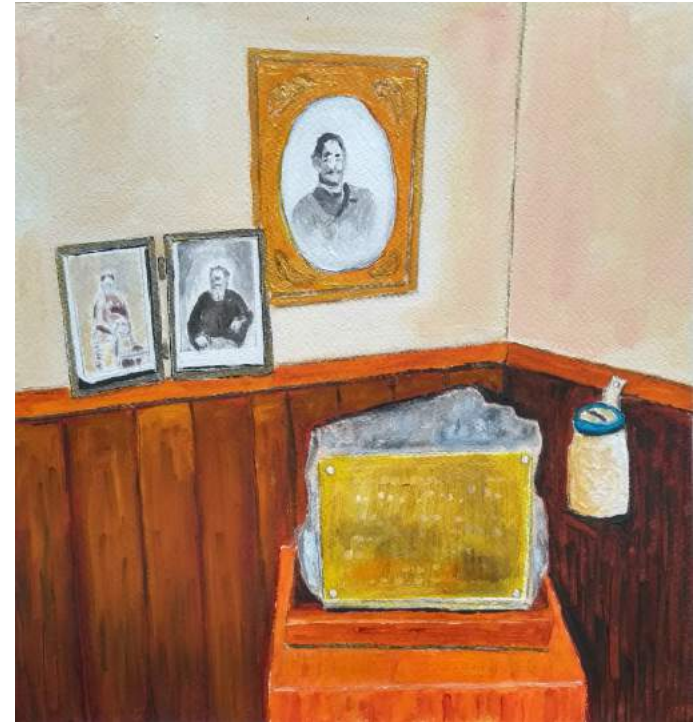
*Waiting Room*, gouache & pencil on paper, 11x15" 2019



*Furnace*, gouache & pencil on paper, 11x15" 2019



*Pusey's Church*, gouache & pencil on paper, 11x12.5", 2019

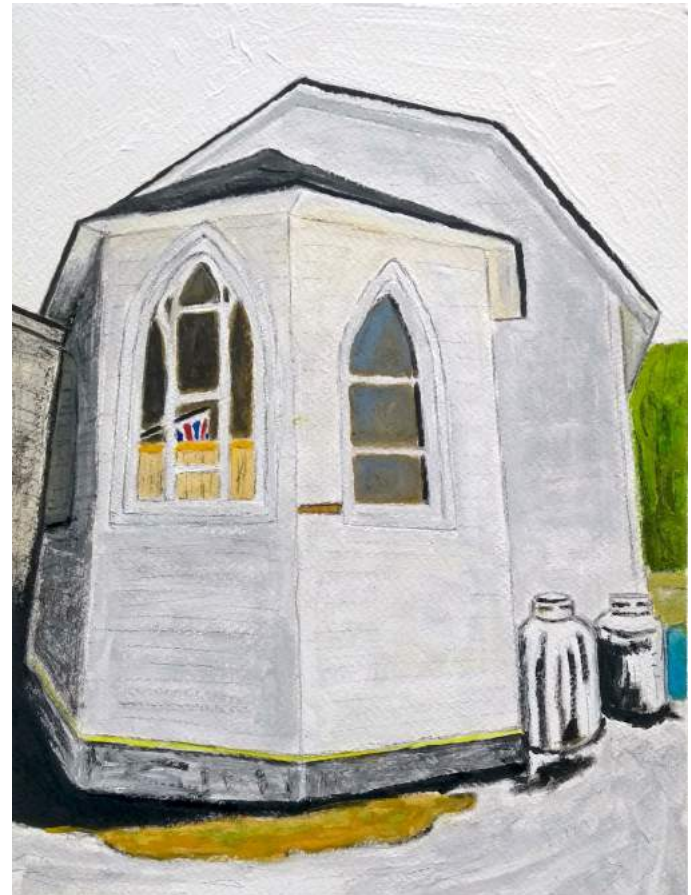


*Pusey's monument*, gouache & pencil on paper, 12x11" 2019





*Landing*, gouache & pencil on paper, 13x10.5" 2019



*The Back of Pusey's Church*,  
gouache & pencil on paper, 12x10" 2019

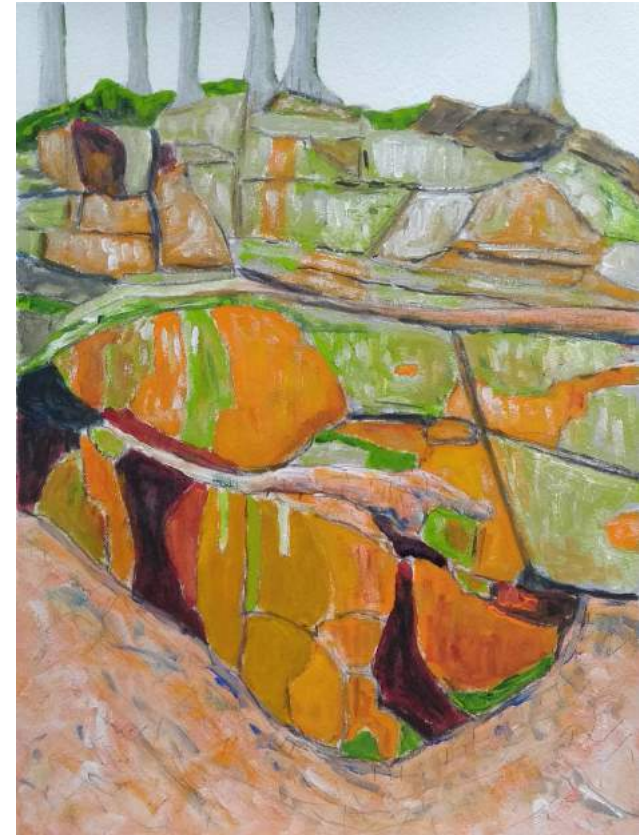


*Rail Car Culvert*, gouache & pencil on paper, 12x10.5" 2019



*Victoria Long Pit Side View*, gouache & pencil on paper, 17x14" 2019





*Victoria Mine No. 2, No. 1, each gouache & pencil on paper, 15sq. ", 15x11" 2019*





*Howland Pit No. 1*, oil on carved wood, 40x42" 2019