

Dougald Hine
Härnevigatan 16, 72341 Västerås, Sweden
www.dougald.nu +46 766 510828 dougald@dark-mountain.net

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Reference for Thomas Keyes

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this as an endorsement of Thomas Keyes as an artist and a collaborator.

I got to know Thomas through my work as co-founder of the Dark Mountain Project – in whose books his writing and art have featured regularly – and our collaboration continued through my time as leader of artistic development at Riksteatern, Sweden's National Touring Theatre.

Over the past year, we have worked closely together, as he was lead artist and art editor for SANCTUM, a special issue of Dark Mountain which I edited. The theme of the issue was 'the sacred' and Thomas played an outstanding role, assembling an international collective of artists – part graffiti team, part monastic scriptorium – who took key lines from each piece in the book and created illuminated 'incipit' pages, inspired by the medieval traditions of insular illumination. Not only did Thomas lead this ambitious collaborative project and create several of the most memorable artworks that appeared in the book, including its cover, he also produced the parchment on which the work itself was made – a process that made use of the skins of twenty roadkill deer. Writing for the book and in two further essays for the Dark Mountain website, his documentation of this work attracted considerable interest, not least for his exploration the connections between the street art culture which he grew up with in Belfast and the traditions of illuminated letters which thrived in Ireland and Scotland some thirteen centuries earlier. Notably, this project attracted the attention of the research team at Trinity College, Dublin who are responsible for the Book of Kells, who have invited Thomas to visit and collaborate with them – as well as a request from the V&A for the book to be included in the National Art Library, a first for Dark Mountain.

The SANCTUM project reflects the latest stage in a collaboration which began eight years ago, when Thomas wrote to us at Dark Mountain with a draft of an essay about art and civilisation. That piece was a little too general, but I was curious about the person behind it, and when I mentioned that I would soon be visiting Scotland, he made the journey from the Black Isle to meet me for an afternoon at a café in Edinburgh. As we talked, he mentioned a text he had begun writing: a recipe for pheasant stew, documenting a roadkill bird he had found the week before and how he had cooked it with ingredients foraged from the local woods. As he described this, I wanted to read it, so I encouraged him to finish the piece and we published it in the second Dark Mountain book. (This piece has since been anthologised in *Walking on*

Lava, the one-volume selection from the first ten issues of Dark Mountain published by Chelsea Green in 2017.)

Working with found materials is a theme that has connected Thomas's writing and his art, exemplified by the deer paintings, made on the skins of roadkill animals with materials taken from the woods in which they lived and depicting those animals in those same woods. There is something deeply satisfying about this work: the images have a weight which does not rely on knowing the story of the materials, but when you learn that story, it is like getting a joke. In a world where many of the activities that make up our days would hardly have made sense a generation ago, this is art that would have made sense a thousand generations ago. Yet we are not dealing with some New Age pursuit of an authentic shamanic past. Thomas is grounded in place and in history, but also in the present. Towards the end of the pheasant recipe, he writes about how his kids pester him into going to Burger King, 'XL Bacon Double Cheese evaporating all resistance.' The videos in which he documents the process of preparing a deer skin are not for the faint-hearted.

When he embarked on the project of bringing his skills to the reimagining of insular art, I was excited by the confluence of practical knowledge and technique with the intellectual currents running through the conversations to which he had been contributing in the context of Dark Mountain. On the practical side, few could be as well-equipped to approach the task – and his background in street art has given him a unique insight into the collective practice of the monastic scriptorium, allowing him to see around the corners which obstruct the view of modern scholars. What excites me is that he has also approached this project from the perspective of works such as Ivan Illich's *In the Vineyard of the Text* and ideas about an epochal transition from an age of proportion to an age of measurement which resonate with those developed by Illich's friend and student Matthias Rieger. If 'the end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world, full stop' – as Paul Kingsnorth and I wrote in the Dark Mountain manifesto – it is nonetheless the end of a way of knowing the world. One of the key characteristics of that way of knowing has been a focus on measurement. By drawing our attention to how different the world looks if the focus rests instead on proportion, Thomas's work offers us the mirror of the past, in which we become aware of the assumptions of our own culture – and so, perhaps, of the possibility of living by other assumptions.

I look forward to continuing to follow Thomas's work and finding further opportunities to collaborate and support his development. And I warmly commend him as an artist whose work is deserving of your support.

Should you have any questions, you are welcome to contact me at the telephone number or email address provided above.

Yours faithfully,

Dougald Hine

Co-founder & Founding Editor, Dark Mountain