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Norway: Arts and Education Exchange from 27 June 2018



"Becoming deeply engrossed in a new environment, especially as an artist, can challenge one's personal outlook but also the public assumptions about the work produced"

Sam van Strien, Artist.

Sam van Strien – Embarking on a summer residency in Bergen with USF

Sam van Strien is an artist based in Mile End, east London, whose work has been exhibited in Britain, America and France. He is currently developing a project that uses drawing to respond to urban architecture. Having recently finished his MFA at Ohio State University in America, and taken part in a residency at Kunstnarhuset Messen in Norway, he decided to travel to Bergen for three months over the summer for a residency at USF. British Council spoke to Sam about his work and interest in the city of Bergen.

How would you describe your work to someone unfamiliar with your practice?

My practice is driven by the question of how – and where – I personally experience architecture; whether this is directly through my own understandings of the metropolis, or indirectly through a photograph, text or another medium. I engage with these direct and mediated responses to architecture by making rubbings of buildings and responding to the archives of architects, for instance those found at RIBA (the Royal Institute of British Architects). An ongoing ‘problem’ motivating what I do is whether architecture may ever be adequately represented in images or texts, or, if it exists only as concrete matter and a thing or place that we can touch and see.

How did you hear about the residency in Bergen with USF?

When I was an Erasmus student in Oslo in 2013 I decided to visit Bergen during the final exhibition period for the BFA students at Bergen University. A few students from the art school and I visited the exhibitions together, which were held at different venues around the city. I happened to visit USF, which is located in an old factory, and was impressed by their gallery space. Later, after reading about the artist’s residency at USF and the opportunities that were on offer, I jumped at the chance to apply and return to the city.

Why would young artists like you want to do a residency in Bergen?

What's really nice about Bergen is that it has a strong arts scene in a city that is relatively small, and has great institutions such as Kunsthall Bergen. There is an intimacy to the city that I also feel makes it an excellent place for young artists to develop their practice. From personal experience, I know that I work well in such an environment. An attraction of USF is that it is an art centre with its own gallery, theatre, cinema and artist studios. I'm looking forward to being around a small but diverse mix of creative people from different arts backgrounds, work in the studio space, live in an apartment on site and focus on my art for three months. This kind of immersion is second to none.

What are the benefits of living in a city for 3 months?

A three month residency offers one time to not only develop a project but feel more secure about the direction in which it travels. One can be ambitious in terms of the work produced and, crucially, settle into an entirely new environment. Too many residencies are much too short; by the time that a rhythm of work has been found, it's time to go home. Because my practice responds to my experiences of urban architecture, having an extended period within which explore and become familiar with Bergen should bring about a greater depth and specificity to whatever I create.

Tell us a bit about your Erasmus stay in Oslo?

My Erasmus exchange provided me with an exclusive opportunity to live and study in Norway. Becoming deeply engrossed in a new environment, especially as an artist, can challenge one's personal outlook but also the public assumptions about the work produced. Because I was fascinated by Norwegian culture and natural landscape when I was growing up, it wasn't hard to refuse an offer to live and study in Oslo. Replacing the London art bubble with an art scene that seemed less pressurised and supportive of its artists was equally attractive. The art academy where I studied was fairly small, which aided a sense of community. The students and staff would even have breakfasts together every Monday morning! I also discovered a few artist-run spaces, small galleries and museums that provided students with the opportunity to exhibit their work. The welcoming, relaxed and supportive environment encouraged me to start experimenting with super8 film and begin to create work that directly responded to the architecture around me. This approach has stayed with me ever since.

You've also spent time in the USA. Where was that and why?

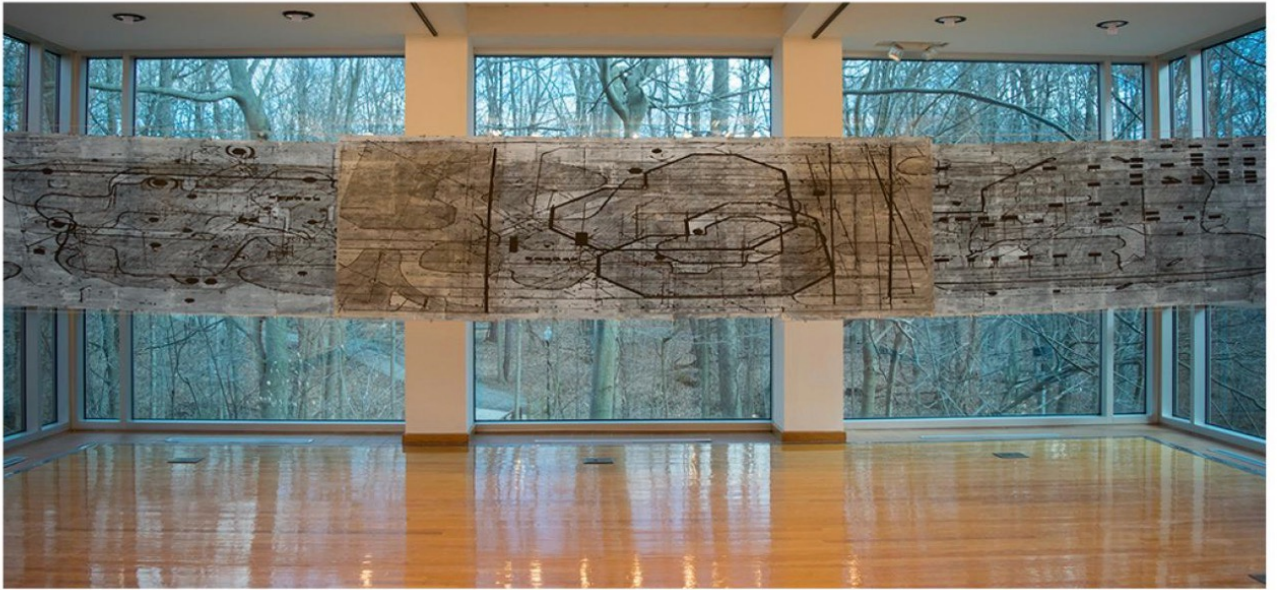
I moved to the US to do a funded MFA at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, which meant that I came out of my studies debt free. It was a three year long programme, which was also nice, and allowed me to teach a few undergraduate classes. A major draw was also the faculty staff at Ohio State. The artists Laura Lisbon and George Rush teach there, and I knew I wanted to work with them and attend other well-taught classes at the university. Taking extra courses helped me develop my practice and style, especially those related to architectural history and theory. More generally, it was a chance to live in America for a few years and explore the country.

Did you find any links between what you'd discovered as an artist working in the UK, Scandinavia and America?

There is a definite distinction in attitudes between artists in different countries, which is partly shaped by their political and economic situations, and specific cultural attitudes. The public attitude towards artists and artist funding is an important factor. To be more specific, based on what I've experienced, artists in Scandinavia have a lot more access to arts funding than in the US or the UK. This provides a firmer foundation from which to focus on making art in the studio and embrace opportunities. If one has to have a part-time job to make ends meet, which can be the case in the UK and USA, it's difficult to enjoy such freedom. Here in Britain artists have to work a lot harder to survive and create a sustainable way of working. Artists in America seem to have an even more intense work ethic, and are often equipped with an inner drive to make things happen. But it could be that they just like to talk more about how hard they work! On the other hand, I moved to the US in August 2014 when Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson. All the unrest that followed – and the ensuing election of Trump in 2016 – has set the tone for a certain work ethic, quality and quantity of art that my friends have been making. The events have also given rise to a lot of questions about their professional purpose. It felt like a time of crisis, compared to the relative calmness of Norway.

Have you any objectives from your stay in Norway?

My objective is to develop a series of drawings in response to contemporary architecture in Bergen, including work with rubbings and drawings from archives. I'd also like to experiment with squeeze paper, a process traditionally used in epigraphy to reveal an impression and detail of a surface, as a new way for me to work with architecture and an extension of my work with rubbings. I'm in contact with a few architectural firms in the city, and I'm planning to visit their offices during my time in Bergen to document their archive of projects. That will then become material that I can also respond to. This will be the first time I've worked with a contemporary architectural firm, so naturally I'm excited to see what happens.



'Unfulfilled Traces' by Sam van Strien. Gesso, pencil rubbing, photo transfer, drafting film, metal wires, tensioners (2016).



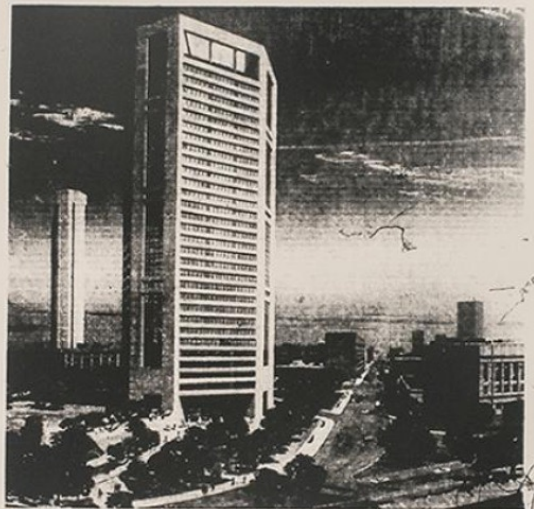
A section of 'American Electric Power' by Sam van Strien.



A section from 'Displacement' by Sam van Strien.



A section of 'American Electric Power' by Sam van Strien.



AEP BUILDING — This is an architect's rendering of the American Electric Power Co. building to be built on the east side of the Hudson River between Spring and Long Sts. At far right is the U.S. Courthouse at 83

Madison Blvd. In the background between the AEP building and the federal court building is the city-owned Madison Building. In the background at left is Natunwide Plaza.

An architect's rendering of the AEP building, part of 'American Electric Power' by Sam van Strien.



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Norway: Arts and Education Exchange from 14 September 2018



The studio used by Sam Strien at artist-in-residence at USF Bergen. Photo (C) Sam van Strien.

"I'm always interested in images of models as an attempt to represent how an architect imagines people might experience the building that they have designed."

Sam van Strien, Artist.

Taking art to the Edge of Europe: Sam van Strien in Bergen

Sam van Strien is an artist based in London (born in Delft in the Netherlands). He is currently an artist-in-residence at USF Arts Centre in Bergen, Norway. After earning a BA in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins in London, where he was also an Erasmus Student at the National Academy of the Arts in Oslo, he went on to complete an MFA from Ohio State University. Sam has exhibited in the USA, UK, France and Norway. He is a member of Acme Studios in London.

Much of Sam's work is driven by questions that relate to how and where people experience architecture and how these encounters might change. He engages with his theme through direct and mediated experiences of architecture, using rubbings of buildings, as well as photographs and texts that he sources from architects' archives.

British Council Norway caught up with Sam, now two months into his residency, and found out what he really thinks about architecture and design in this west coast city on the edge of northern Europe.

Tell us about your time in Bergen and at the USF so far?

The residency is going very well. I've been working in my studio at USF for the past six weeks, engrossed in my work. I will stay installed here until the end of September. The space is large and has views overlooking the sea. It's a marvellous space in which to be making art; it allows me both to ruminate and to focus.

I've also had time to get to know members of the cultural community here. I've met artists and architects, and have been to events such as those hosted by Bergen Kunsthall. With the natural landscape so close by, there have been quite a few hikes in the mountains surrounding Bergen and a few opportunities to go swimming in the sea just outside USF.

What kind of work have you been developing?

I've been making a series of drawings, rubbings and photographic prints that respond to modern and contemporary architecture in Bergen. They partly rely on the archives of Mad, an architecture firm based in Bergen that was behind Media City (a prominent corporate building in the Bergen and a centre for media companies in the region). In short, I've been looking at the model that the architects who built Media City made, and how they photographed this model. I trace these images and project them as the starting point for my drawings. I'm always interested in images of models as an attempt to represent how an architect imagines people might experience the building that they have designed. Contemporary architects tend to use visual renderings to represent how they envisage a building. I'm curious as to whether a physical model shapes our experience of architecture differently from visual models.

Tell us about your working process

I've made rubbings from the Media City building in the public square designed by the architects. I've then etched on top of the rubbings using a laser-cutting machine. The image that is cut into the rubbings with the laser comes from a photograph of the surface of the public square. I'm keen to recognise how these rubbings could be experienced as simultaneously abstract and real, detached from and in relation to the building itself.

Has the art scene in Bergen captured your heart?

Bergen's variety of cultural institutions cannot fail to impress, and there is a lively arts scene that envelops the city and makes one feel immensely supported as a young artist. Many people who come from abroad to train stay on for longer, and that is a major plus.

The most interesting visits I've made have been to the Aleda and Bergen Ateliergruppe, which is in a building in the working port of Bergen. Bergen Kunsthall has some great exhibitions, too, such as Torbjørn Rødland and Andrea Büttner whose work was recently on show. There are also inspiring film screenings and artist talks. Other galleries, such as Entrée, Hordaland Kunstsenter, and the Art Academy, are hubs for ideas, too. And of course, USF has exhibitions in its gallery space, as well as gigs, festivals, performances and screenings. As a resident, I can attend these for free. I am loving being immersed in culture 24/7!

Has your interest in architecture developed since you arrived in Bergen?

At the start of my residency, I met Celia Glanfield of Mad architects, who was on the team behind the Media City building. We discussed the building and looked through the drawings, photographs and videos that they produced during the design and construction of the building. One of the highlights of this meeting was our ensuing conversation, which concentrated on how artists and architects can think about architecture completely differently. It was an eye-opener. I then returned to the studio with a fresh energy with which to develop ideas and drawings based on the materials that were part of the original Media City building scheme.

An exhibition by architect Cristian Stefanescu and artist Apichaya Wanthiang at Hordaland Kunstsenter also changed my approach to architecture and the built environment. This duo collaborates on projects to create installations and environments in the gallery. My curiosity stemmed from how they wrote about their work. I decided to meet Cristian to discuss this, and to hear more about the architectural scene in Bergen and his personal perspective as an architect who also engages with artistic practice. Cristian teaches at the Bergen Architecture School, so I was able to visit and see their Architecture diploma exhibition at the same time.

From a historic and contemporary perspective, I've found Bergen an especially exciting city to look at. The range of buildings here is remarkable, from the wooden houses of Bryggen where the merchants and fishermen lived, to the modernist architecture of Grieghallen and Bergen City Hall. The surrounding landscape of mountains and sea cannot fail to amaze.

What are your objectives for the rest of your stay at USF?

There are a fair few! A series of drawings from the architectural model need to be finished, and I'll be making rubbings and photographic prints until the end of the residency. I also plan to meet a few other architects, such as 3RW, who've built a lot of contemporary architecture in Bergen and abroad, and MIR, who portray unbuilt architecture, as well as artists and curators. At the end of my residency I'll have an Open Studio event to display the work I've done here. I've no doubt that the next few weeks will fly by, and I will relish every moment.



© Charcoal rubbing by Sam van Strien. All images (C) the artist.



A detailed view of the laser-etched charcoal rubbing by Sam van Strien.

External links

- › [Sam Van Strien official website](#) 
- › [Bergen Kunsthall](#) 
- › [Hordaland Kunstsenter](#) 
- › [Aldea](#) 
- › [Bergen Architecture School](#) 
- › [Bergen Ateliergruppe](#) 