



the mammoth

**another project from
owl art studio
2013**





elm

tusks: gold leaf on white pine

six foot high, five foot across, four inches deep

spring - summer 2013

robin tatham

mark brooks





(desperate elements...)

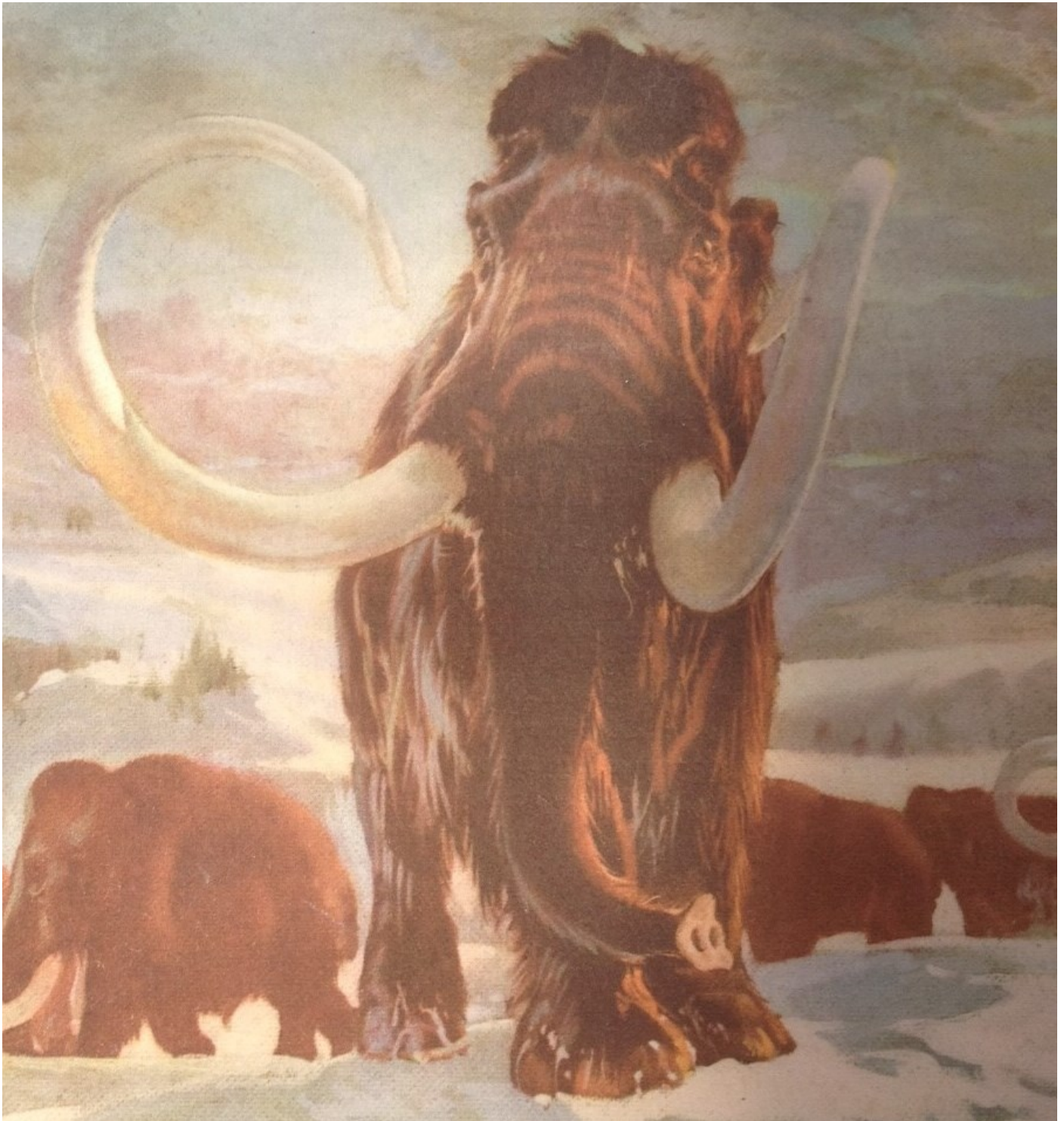
a carving project is a conjunction of
disparate elements.



this one started with a slab of elm owl
studio brought back from our Oxford
woodsource Phil-the Mill, just after our
return from Cambodia in early March
2013.

six foot by three foot, three inches thick,
our elm, a vanishing resource...

we gave it an initial sanding, to bring out
the grain a bit, and leaned it up against
the studio wall for contemplation what is
waiting inside to appear?

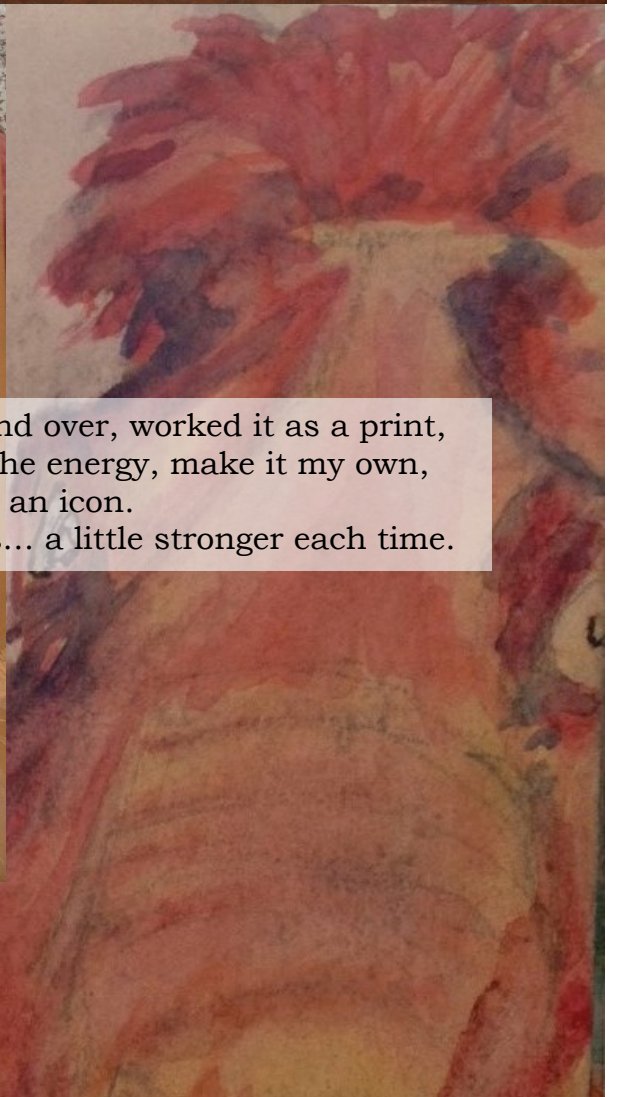
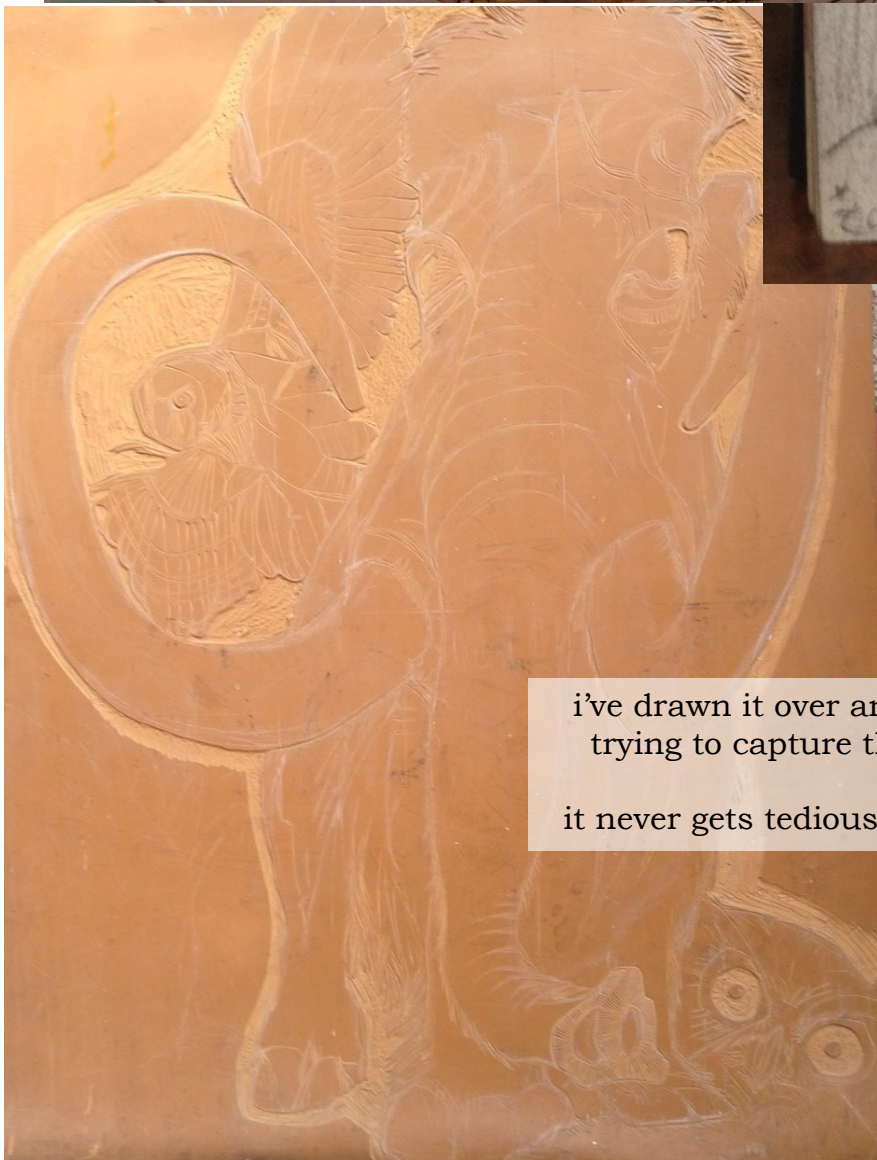


approaching the project from a different angle: the Ice Age Woolly Mammoth. another charity-shop discovery, this book... done in Hungary, 1941...?!

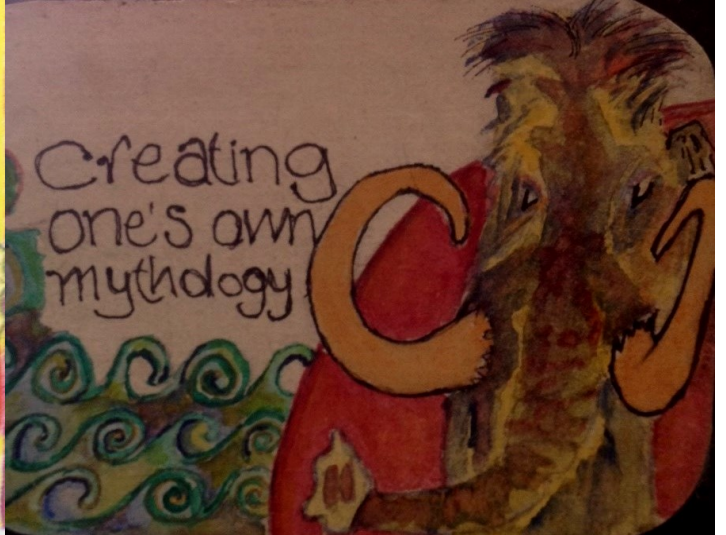
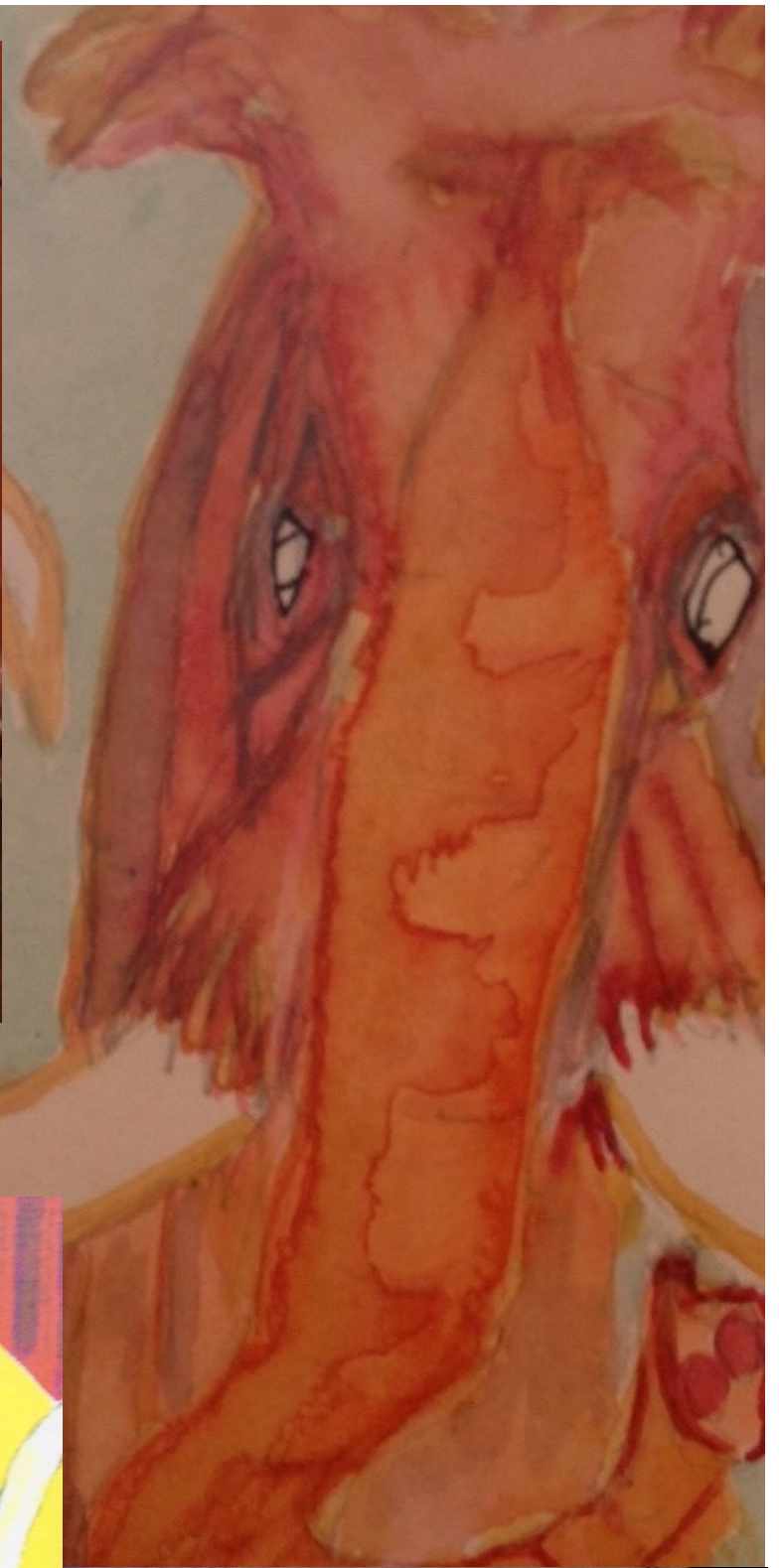
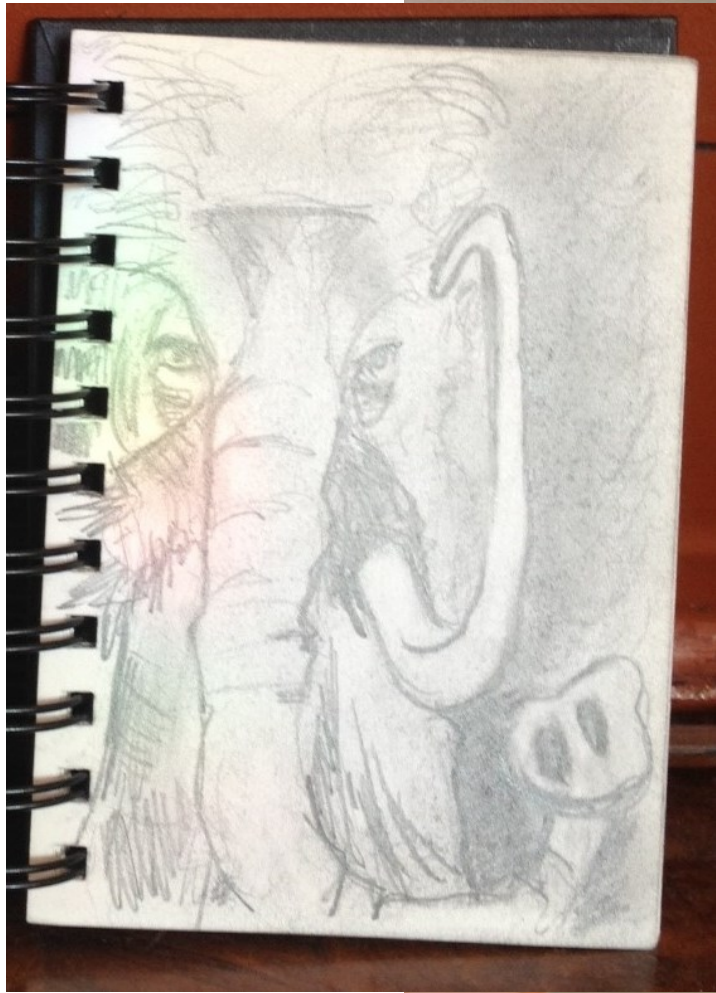
in the mad chaos of World War Two, this gentleman was doing this, that re-emerges a world later, a world away, here in owl studio and the new Millennium.

such is the Mystery of Art: time capsules to the future.

on this mammoth, the artist hit the bullseye: majestic: the aura, the shaginess, the intelligence in the eye, gleaming out at us... the best mammoth in the owl studio library.



i've drawn it over and over, worked it as a print,
trying to capture the energy, make it my own,
an icon.
it never gets tedious... a little stronger each time.



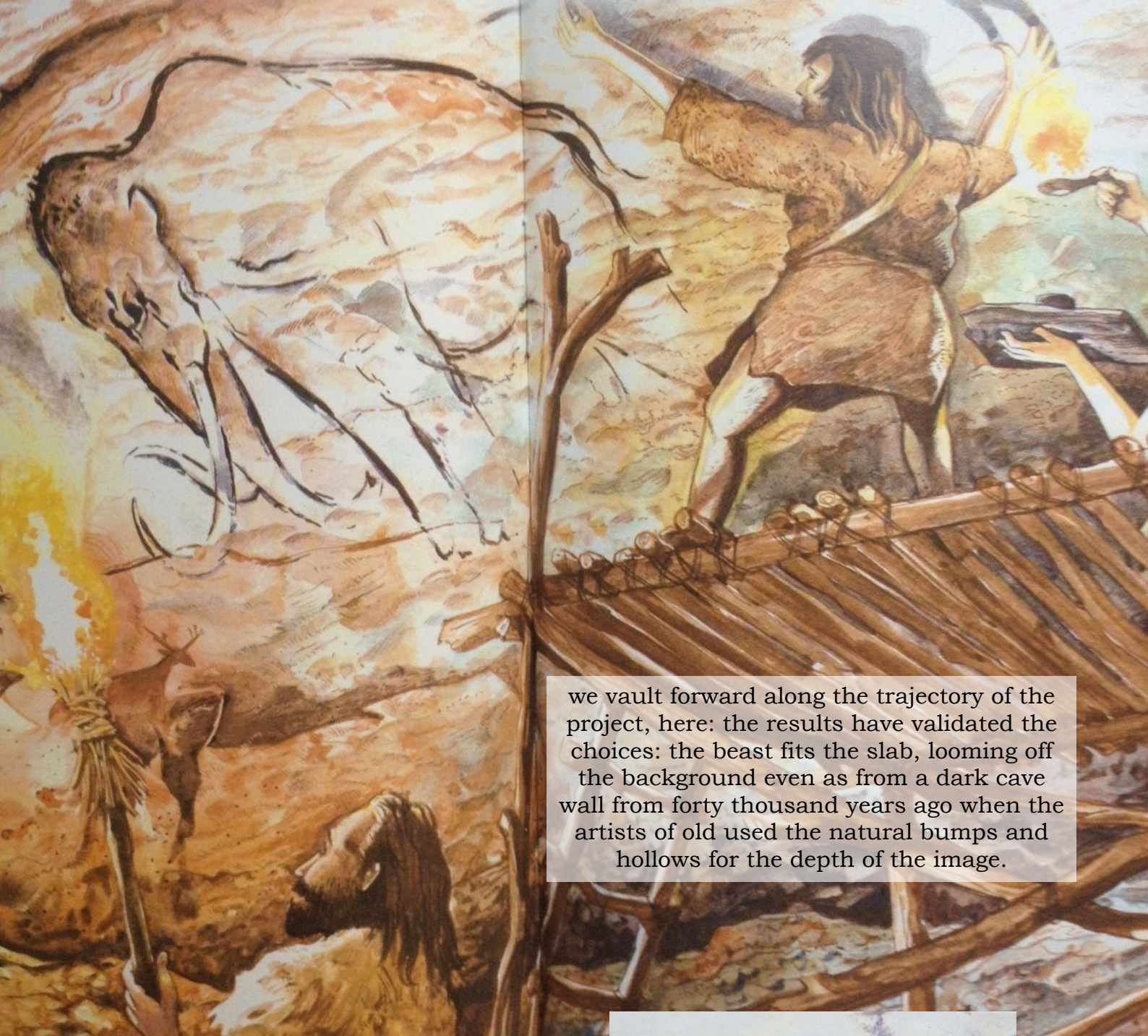
VERILY: what do we see in the slab of elm? you'll never guess...



and finally, another Element swooping in from the wings to join the party: the memory of a copper fish in Salisbury cathedral long ago has been biding its time to emerge...

and Mark, a treasurehouse of craft skills, knows how to gild, from his days working on mirror frames for the Portobello Market: how appropriate for the tusks!





we vault forward along the trajectory of the project, here: the results have validated the choices: the beast fits the slab, looming off the background even as from a dark cave wall from forty thousand years ago when the artists of old used the natural bumps and hollows for the depth of the image.

and the wood grain adds detail and texture to the work.



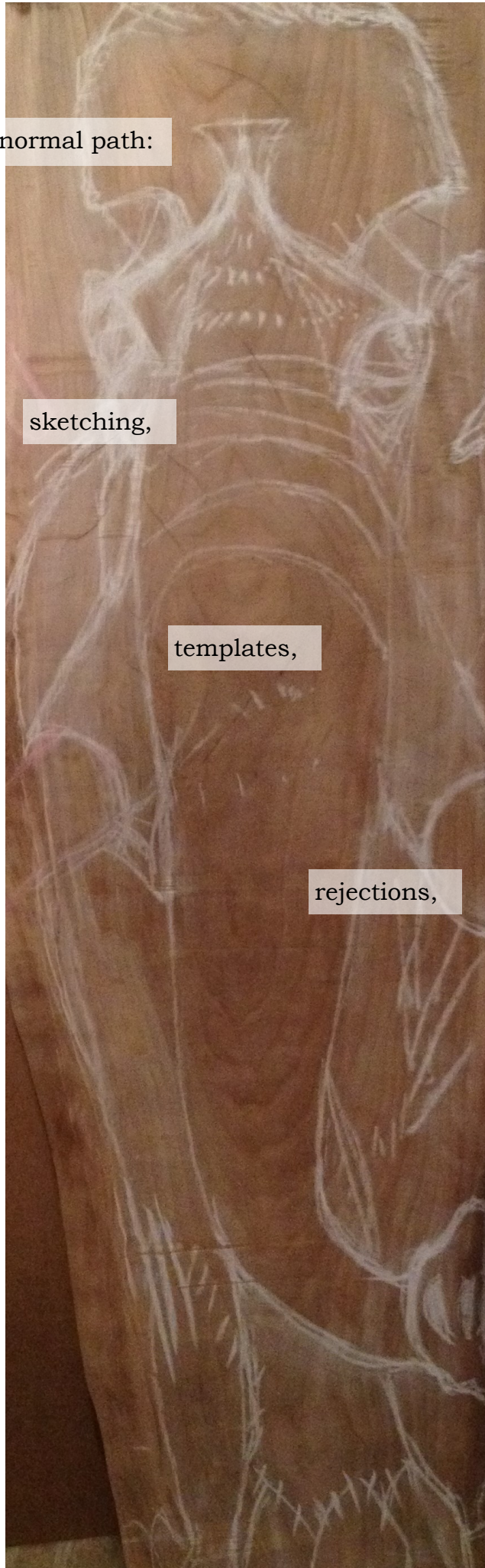
the project follows the normal path:

sketching,

templates,

rejections,

discovery.



i have long since discovered how much harder it is to get proportion and placement accurate on a big scale – my, I admire the large muralist – a future goal.



‘Mammoth’, Viktor Schreckengost]

...persistence does arrive.

then to get the size of the tusks in harmony with the slab, and find a curve that fits the image. we referred to various models, trying to get it right.





then we rig the drop sheets,
create a carving-tent in the middle of
the owl studio salon,





create a mini-tornado of shavings and dust, all confined within the work area (well, more or less) with the power tool noise confined behind the closed studio door, sparing our neighbourhood our creative throes.





and LO! it emerges:
from the broad
strokes to the fine...





the eyes are always
a major focal point;
getting them right
is ever a challenge.





the devil is in the detail: sand, sand, SAND. aiming for the maximum degree of finish.

our standard is the seventeenth century marquetry in view in our oft-visited Wallace Collection: walnut sideboards and so forth. varnished French craftsmen whose touch lives on, for the Ages.



actually, this approach can drive you out of your mind after a while... we sometimes took a break from the infinite detail, and had an almighty bash at a parallel project: the Post of Oak, to go outdoors in the new rose garden... to be a bit of a sculpture park, so the fantasy runs...

a change is as good as a rest, y'know? (and even better than being arrested)



so... onward, slowly...

and at the end of the day, lean the piece back up
against the wall, stand back a wee bit,
contemplate the sum total of the day's work:

always looks different, changing as the light
changes – that's the magical element of
sculpture: light and shadow.



light
and
delight...

ah, the TUSKS. a separate evolution from the central slab of the body – the tusks started with two great lumps of white pine, planks discovered whilst walking back from Cricklewood one afternoon, abandoned on the street.

they must have been a good six foot by eight inches by two inches, we commandeered an abandoned shopping cart to lug them home to owl studio: salvage. and for some years, they waited patiently their turn to serve our purpose, for a while edging the front walk to Alan's house. time came to do the tusks, we looked all around at available resources, and landed on them.



starting with a paper template,
we managed to fit,
a line,
outline,
measure
and cut.





then came sawing, drilling,
pegging and gluing.





more sawing, heavy sanding, and slowly,
slowly, even as out of the arctic tundra
emerged the majestic curve of the imposing
tusks.



in preparation for the gold leaf, Mark explains, we need several foundation layers: after fine sanding, reducing the grain to a smooth surface, we paint the whole thing white with finishing quality plaster. once done, it's sanded again and done again, to fill in the almost invisible grain of the wood: perfection our goal.



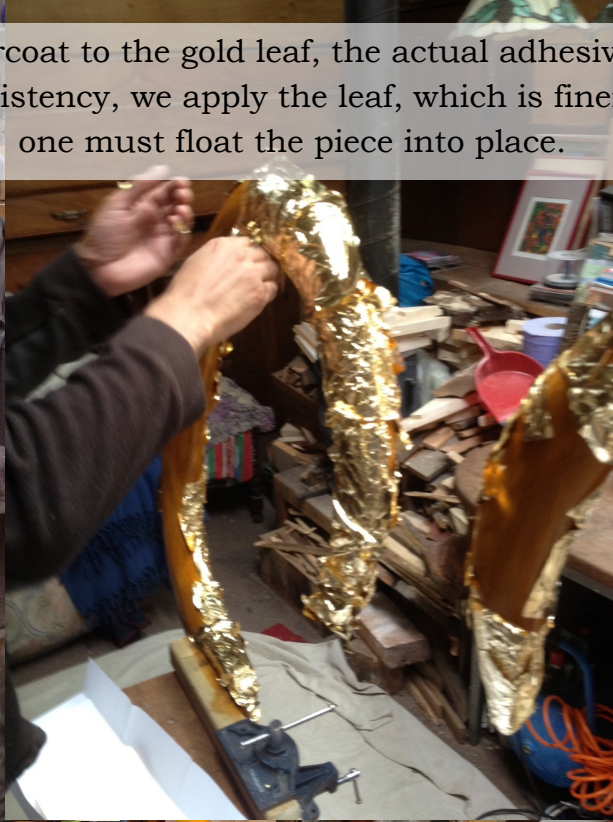
once the plaster is dry and smooth, we paint on a coat of 'bole' – a very fine liquid clay, a rich gold hue to give the colour foundation layer for the gold leaf.



once the clay is dry, two coats of 'button polish', which is pure shellac, cousin to French polish, apparently, to seal and protect.



after this comes the undercoat to the gold leaf, the actual adhesive surface. once that has dried to a tacky consistency, we apply the leaf, which is finer than thistle-down. one must float the piece into place.



fine work with a fine, dry, clean paintbrush turns it from jagged tinsel into a fine gold surface.





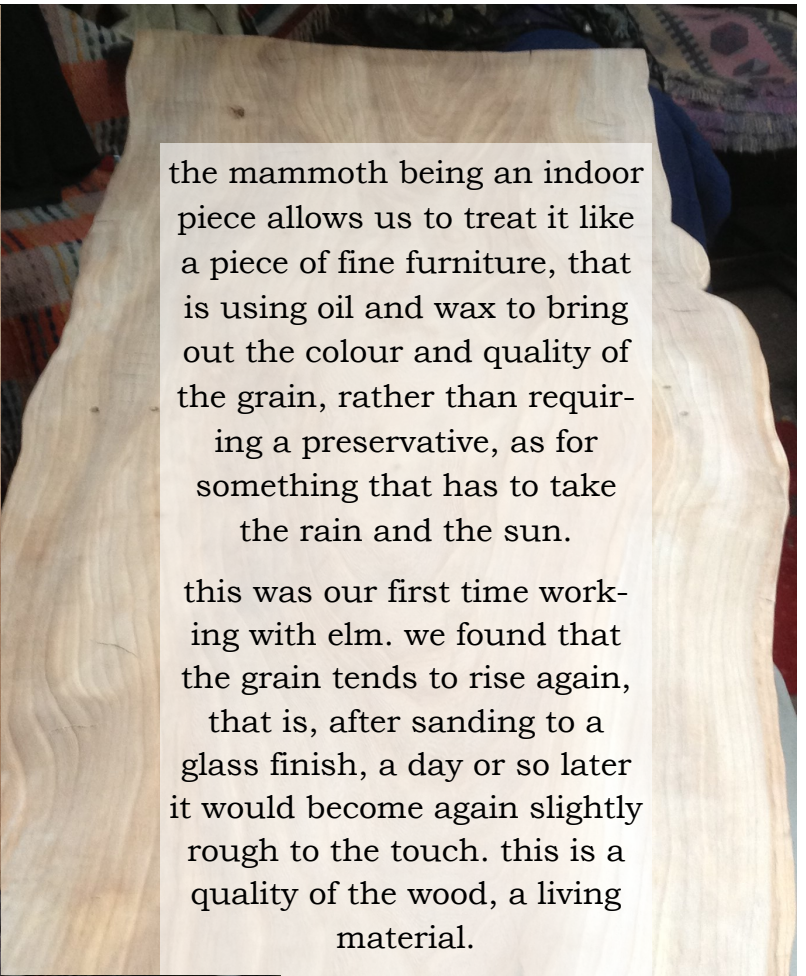
and finally, once the gold is in place,
several coats of sealant
to protect it once again.





the mammoth being an indoor piece allows us to treat it like a piece of fine furniture, that is using oil and wax to bring out the colour and quality of the grain, rather than requiring a preservative, as for something that has to take the rain and the sun.

this was our first time working with elm. we found that the grain tends to rise again, that is, after sanding to a glass finish, a day or so later it would become again slightly rough to the touch. this is a quality of the wood, a living material.



it's always a great moment when the first oil goes on. I always think of The Wizard of Oz, when the whole movie goes from black and white to brilliant colour. the whole thing comes alive.



we were amazed at the transformation of elm.
a new experience. a huge range of hues in the
red-cinnamon spectrum, really a gift to the
craftsman to see all that unexpected richness.
personality flows into the piece.



a second coat of oil, a rub down to
remove any trace of surface sheen,
and then wax wax wax, buff buff buff.
and the piece is ready for the world.

(is the world ready for the piece?)





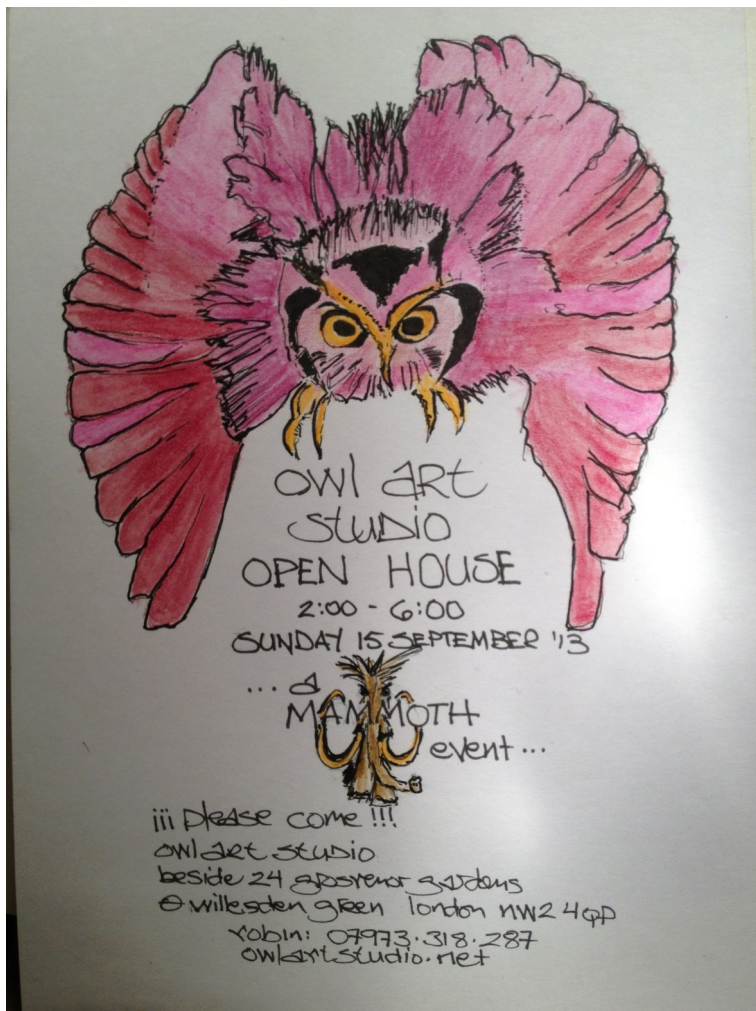
it only remains to be assembled.

due to the scale of this piece, it is designed to be easily disassembled for easy transport and storage – the pragmatic route to the fantasy craft.

it became apparent that to show the piece off to best advantage, a black background would be our best move. the thought occurred, I put out the word to the crew to keep an eye for black material, and, ‘we’ll need to rig up a framework to hold it.’ that very morning, on the morning jogging route, I find the perfect three-part folding screen... exactly the right height and width – ‘there are no coincidences’... all it needed was a wipe down, and we covered it with black canvas.



time to show it to the world.



a grand turn out,
and a good time had by all...





and also... the summer of 2013 saw another chapter in the ongoing owl studio street garden project...



just around the corner from owl studio HQ, on the high street of Willesden Green, for long, lonely years had been a derelict dump of an ex-garden.



finally, we got our hands on it.



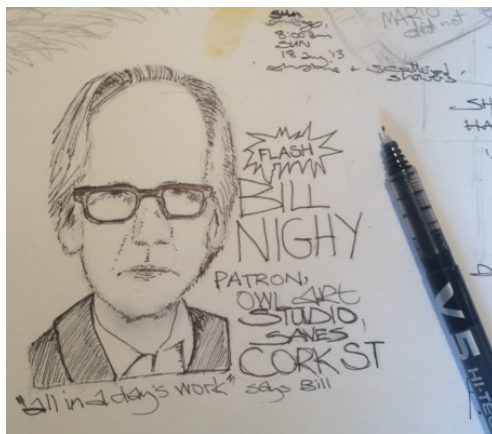
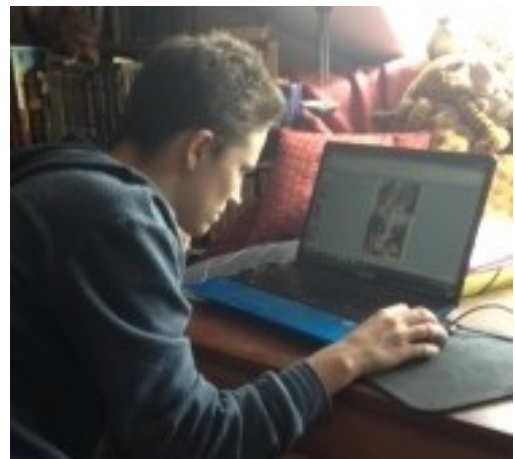
Cinderella,
you CAN come to the Ball!



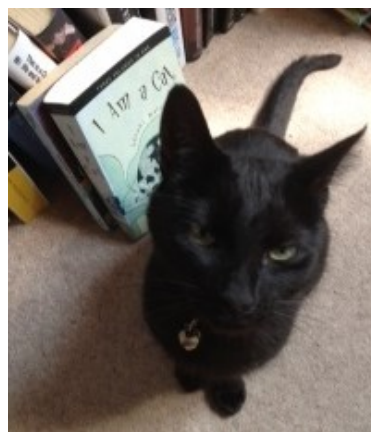


project carried out by
owl studio artistic director
robin tatham,
to whose Don Quixote
trustee mark brooks
once again played an
imperturbable Sancho Panza.

lucie dragongirl kinchin managed to
assemble the booklet,
as well as the ongoing website effort.



patron bill lends his customary
benign support.



supervised by button.



this article can be found online at
www.owlartstudio.me
along with various other endeavours
also check out **www.owlartstudio.net**

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