



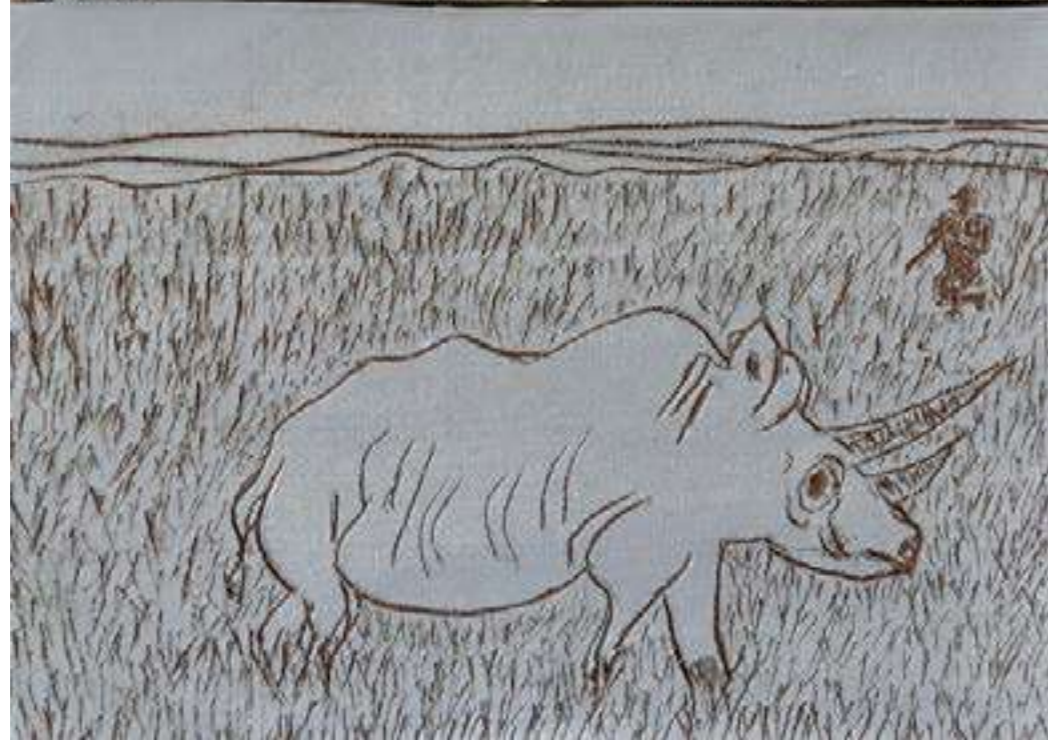
IVORY FOREST  
**An Elephant Crisis**  
LOTTIE VENN



## *Extinct*

Extinction has been a key topic throughout my project, specifically human impact on wildlife and it's ever decreasing population. At the beginning I was exploring the most critically endangered species, and looking into the causes for their decline in population. My aim throughout this year has been to create work which will shock and educate people, raising awareness of the rapid decline in species leading to extinction.





My initial research led me to experimenting with illustrations onto ceramic pieces. I've been interested in storytelling through imagery throughout. I enjoy the quality of the sgraffito technique a lot, the way you can create such detailed images with a series of lines and mark making.



To begin with, I was combining functionality with the topic of extinction, to create products that would raise awareness to the destruction of species.





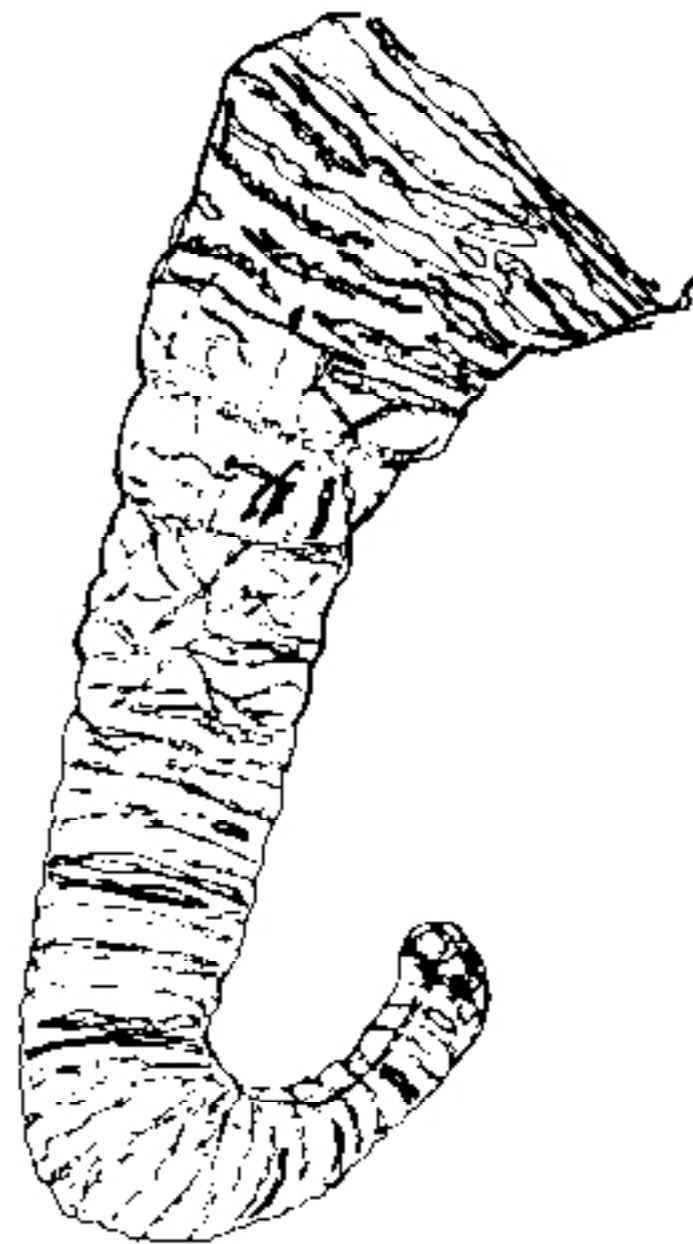
An area I was investigating was the impact of palm oil. At this point, I wanted to create tableware pieces with illustrations drawn on, that would hold the food or drink that is impacting the populations of a number of endangered species. The butter dish was created because many margarines and some butters, including vegan butter, contain palm oil, which I found very contradictory considering palm oil plantations are wiping out thousands of species and destroying their habitats.

## *Howletts Wildlife Park*

Over the christmas holidays I visited Howletts Wildlife Park. It was a big turning point in my project. I started focusing more specifically on elephants, looking at their specific features. I became more interested in textures, patterns and movement.

For my dissertation I studied the ivory trade, so honing in on elephants became a natural focus point. It was also the point that I decided to take on more of a sculptural approach to my making.







In the elephant enclosure I spoke to one of the park workers and was able to go into the ‘behind the scenes’ area, where they keep objects such as ivory and teeth specimens. It was really interesting to handle these objects and get a feel for their texture and form. The ivory had such a smooth surface, it was silky to touch with a matte sheen.



While I was watching the elephants at the reserve, I was so fascinated by how beautiful they are, how they engage with each other, how majestic and gentle their movements are. It really solidified my passion for wanting to help save the species, and made me want to do everything I can to educate people on the severity of the issue.





After my trip to Howletts my focus shifted away from the idea of making functional objects. I was inspired by the up close details of what I had seen in the elephant enclosure. From this point onwards I was focussing on elephant skin and ivory, with ideas looking more at sculptural pieces, textures and forms.





Working with wood I experimented with tusk shapes to get a feel for size and form. By doing this I was able to get a shape I was happy with, to create a master which I could then cast from in plaster.



## Slip Casting



The first cast from my mould didn't go to plan, and spilt out. However it left some really interesting pieces with very elephant like patterns. They unfortunately were not usable as they had plaster residue in them, so could not be fired. When the first successful cast came out, I wasn't very happy with the form as it didn't grasp the tusk aesthetic I wanted to be creating.



## *Kenyan Ivory Stock Pile Burn*

In 2016 Kenya decided to burn all of its ivory stock piles, in a powerful message to show the world, and the poachers that they were committed to put a complete end to the trade. They burnt 105 tonnes of ivory estimated to be worth around \$100 million. At the burning Kenyan president stated ‘No one has any business trading in ivory, for this trade means death. Death of our elephants, and death of our natural heritage. In destroying the ivory we reject once and for all those who think that our natural heritage can be sold for money.’

The imagery and concept of this was very powerful to me. I started to think about creating a burnt look on the tusks, and creating sculptural pieces stacked on each other.



Stacks of ivory burning at the Nairobi national park. Photograph: Carl de Souza/AFP/Getty Images



## Holly Budge

Holly is the founder of the charity How Many Elephants. She uses her work to create human, emotional connections to the ivory trade. The necklace in this photo is composed of 96 elephant profiles, all hinged together created from a material called Vegetable Ivory.





Something that really drew me to Budge's work was how she uses it to shock audiences, presenting statistics in imagery to show the magnitude of elephants being poached each year, and as a result raise awareness to the issue. This technique of engaging the audience is a clever crafting strategy to project, and is a technique I have tried to use within my work.



## *Siddiq El Nigoumi*

Nigoumi was a big inspiration to me in my final year. His beautiful pieces use traditional techniques such as, coiling, sgraffito, burnishing and smoke firing. All techniques combined create these lovely detailed pieces. What draws me to them the most is the soft perfect surface.



By burnishing the pieces, he creates this sheen which is silky to touch. The surface of burnished objects is similar to that of ivory, as I discovered at Howletts. His decoration merged Western iconography with traditional African patterns. All of this was very inspiring to me, and is what led me to experiment with coiling, burnishing and smoke firing my work.

*First coiled tusk*



I used a wooden tool to merge the coils on the outside together.



While pinching and pressing down the coils on the inside.

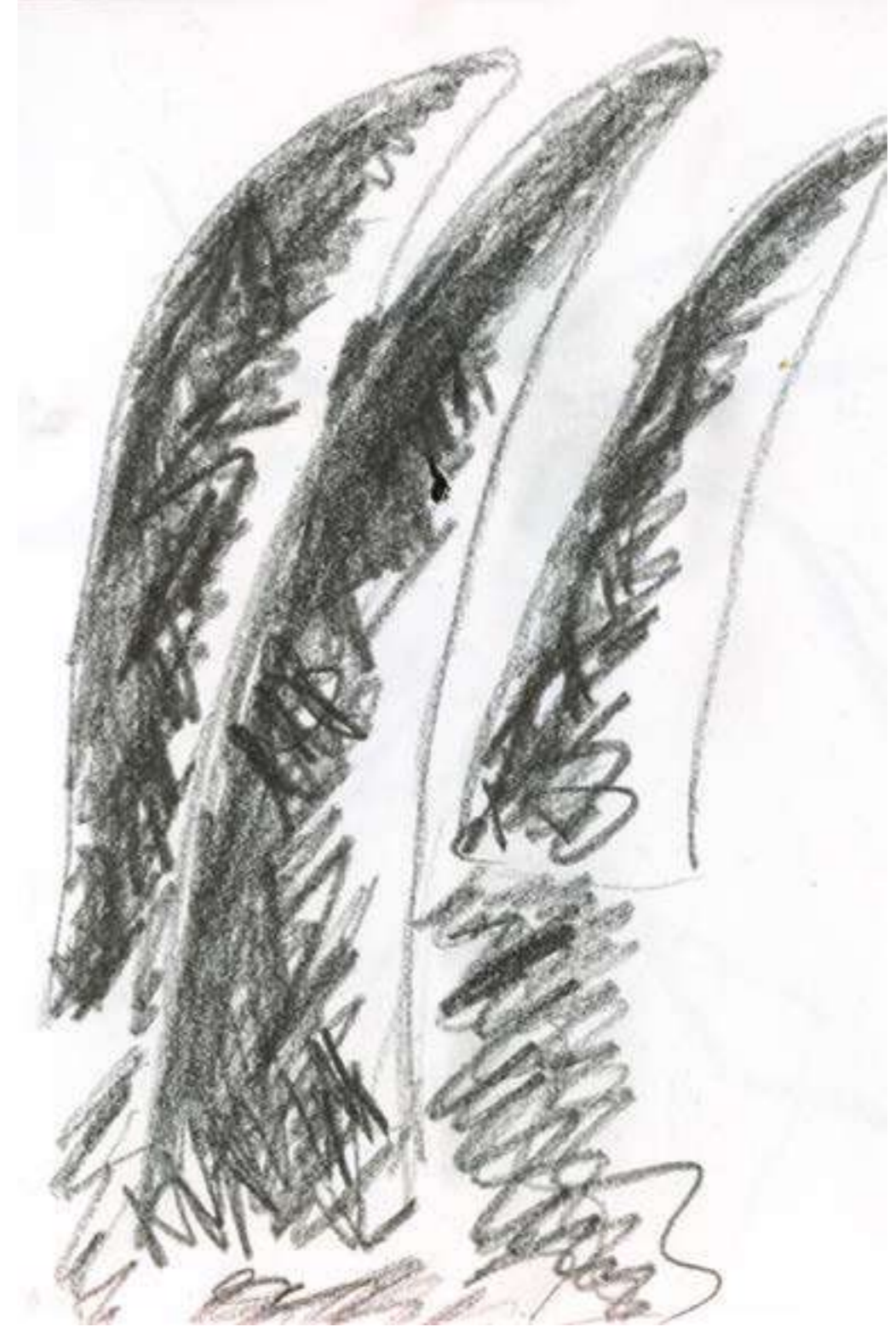


## *Burnishing*

Burnishing is a technique used to create a smooth sheen on the surface of ceramics without using a glaze. This was the perfect technique for my tusks, as I wanted to create the silky smooth surface similar to ivory. To burnish the tusks I used the back of a spoon, and pebbles, which both give the same effect. Burnishing the surface of the clay creates a sealed area of compressed clay which is what creates the shine and smooth texture.

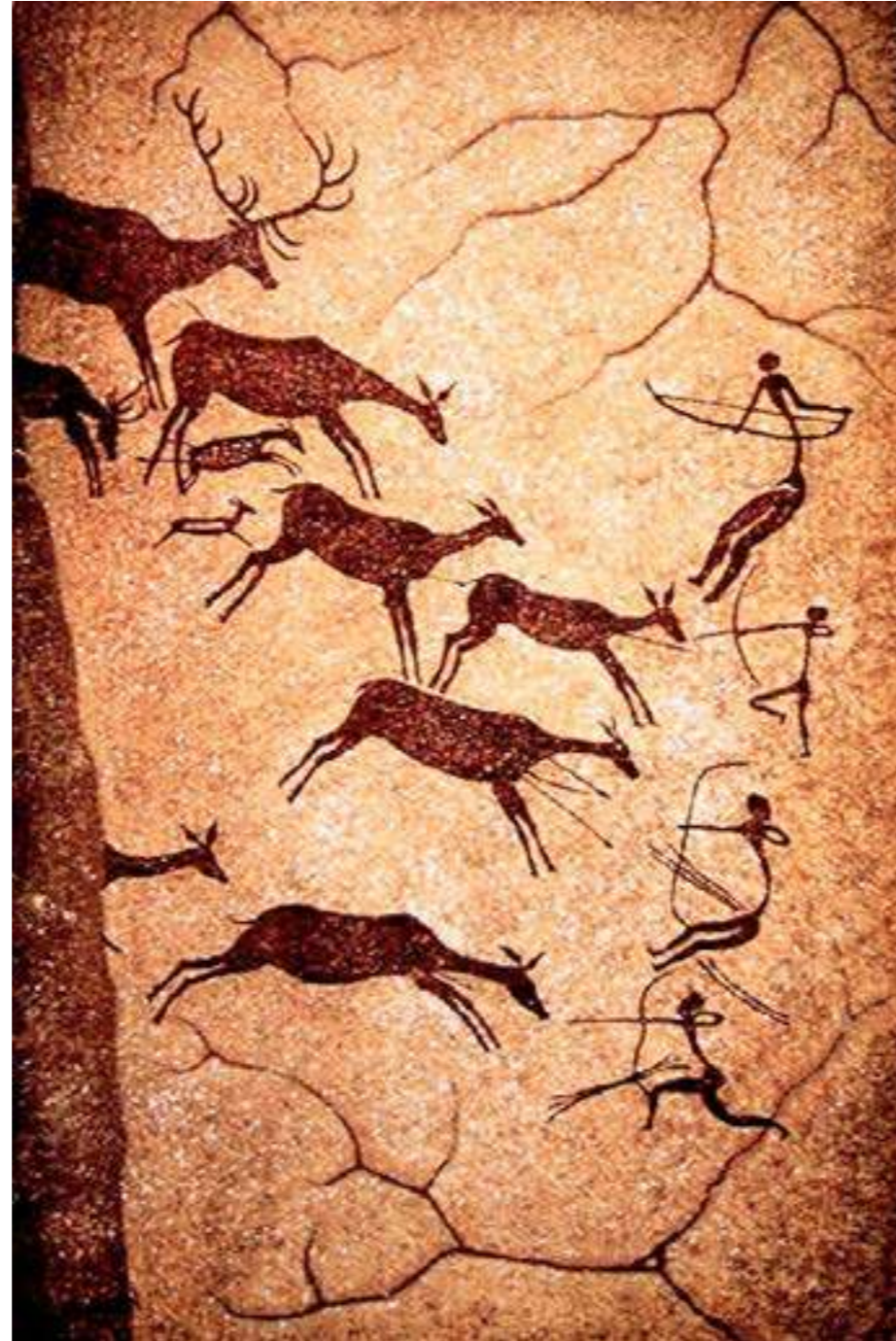


The burnishing works especially well with smoke fired, or Raku pieces when not using a glaze to decorate.



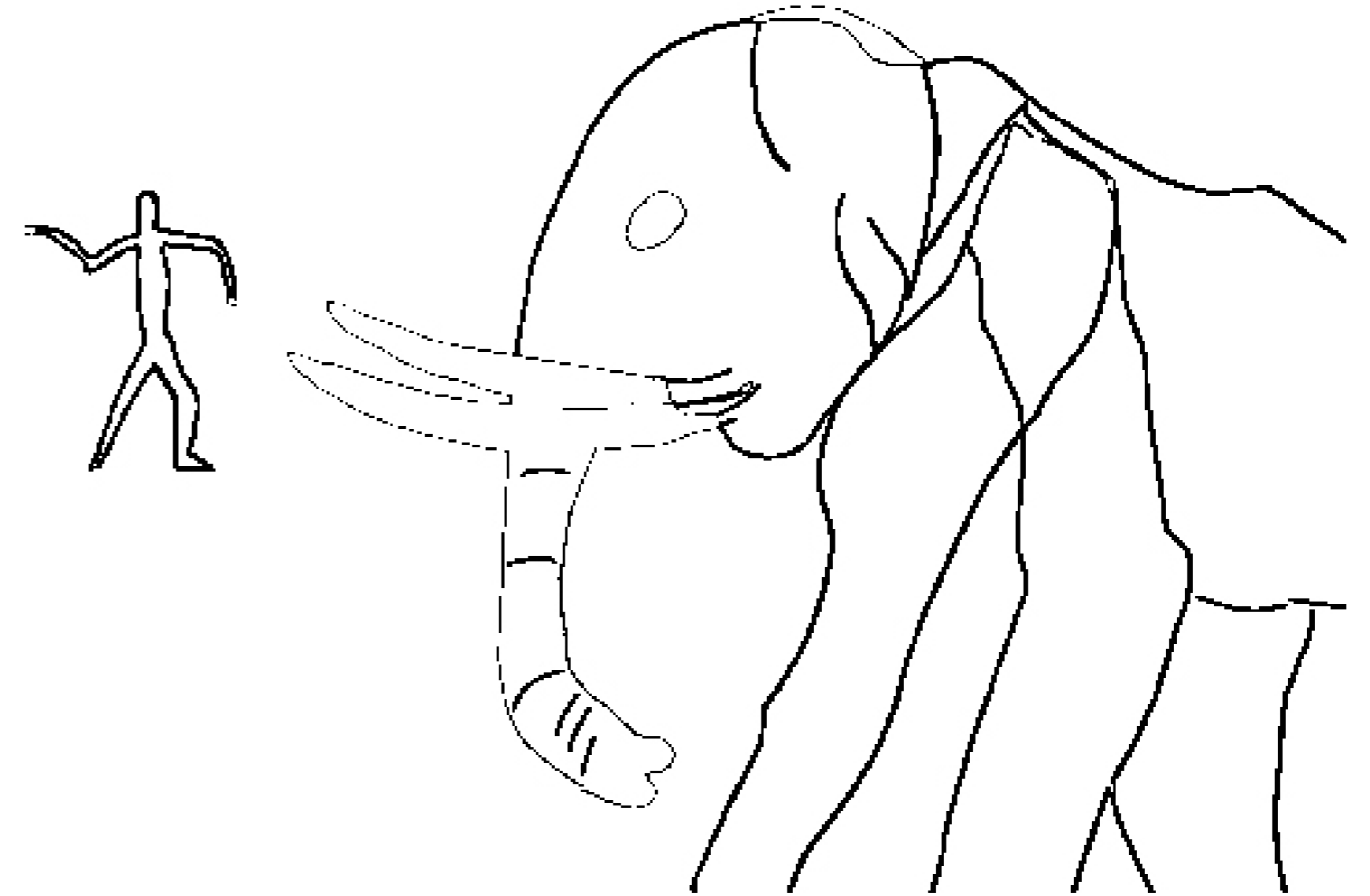
## Cave Paintings

Through experimenting with illustrations, I became more interested in cave paintings. I love the simplicity of the style, it has a raw and organic aesthetic which tells stories with movement and clarity. The stories portray primitive tales of the hunters and their prey, which was inspiring for a theme to use for my story telling.



## *Hunter and the hunted*

Breaking the story down to the hunter and the hunted, I began working on drawings to tell a simple tale of the hunters chasing the elephants. I wanted the images to have life and energy, like the cave imagery does.



# How Many Elephants Ambassador Video



During my research I was in contact with How Many Elephants founder Holly Budge, I applied for the position of Brand Ambassador and was successful, I am now an ambassador for them.

I had to create this introductory video of myself, showing my work and explaining what my project is all about for them to post on their website and social medias.

"How Many Elephants Exhibition (@Howmanyelephants) • Instagram Photos And Videos". Instagram. Com, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/howmanyelephants/?hl=en>.



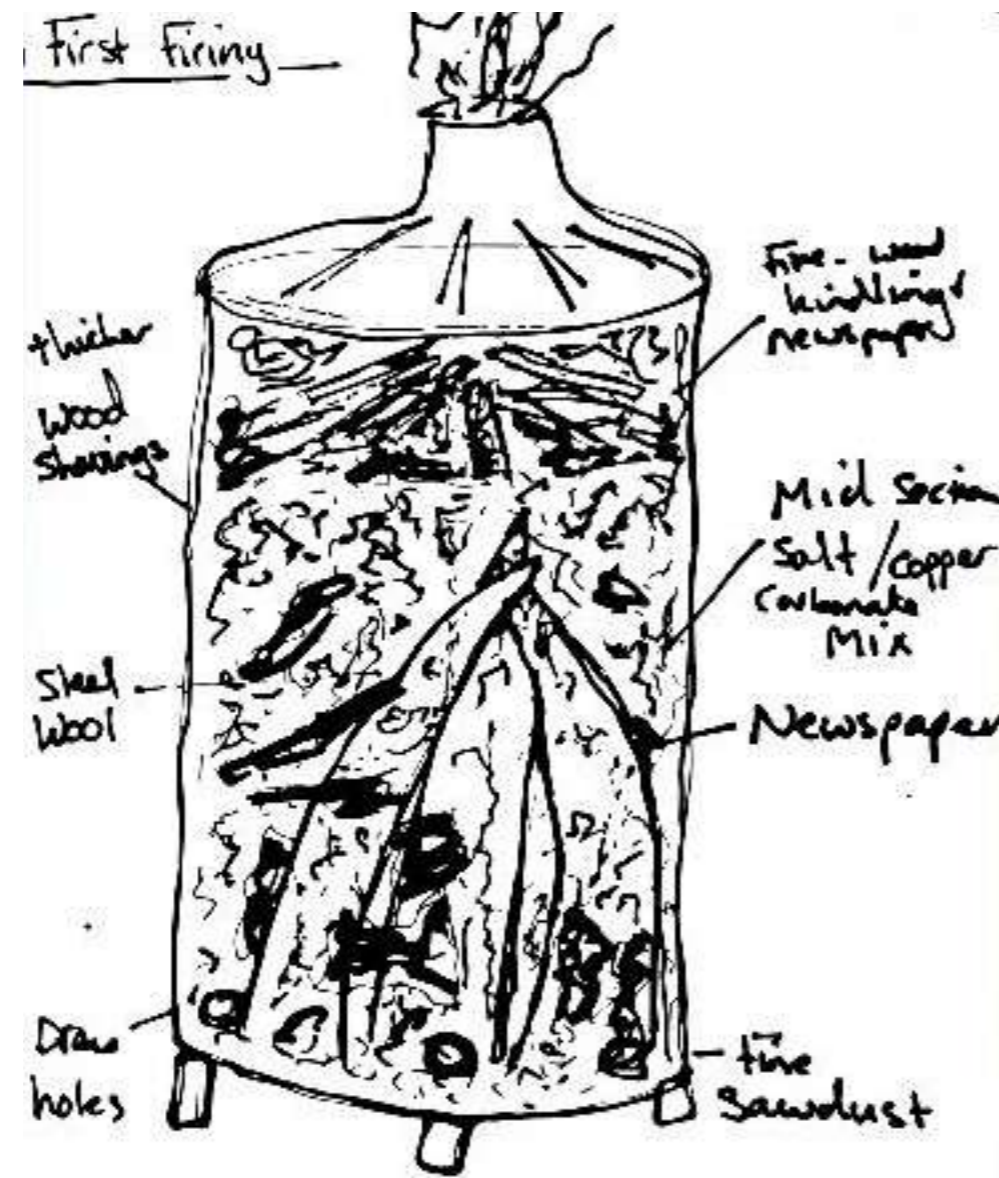


## *Terra Sigillata*

From research I found that the best way to achieve a perfect smooth texture, was to burnish and then apply Terra Sigillata onto the surface. Terra sigillata is an ultra-refined clay slip which creates the smooth sheen. It can be used on its own or used like I did, onto a burnished surface.

## Smoke Firing

Because of the danger from fumes created during the process I carried out all my smoke firings on site, in an area away from human activity, in dustbin kilns. My first firing was very successful and I had no breakages. The firings varied quite drastically in time, from 6-24 hours.





The bottom section of the dustbin kiln consists of fine sawdust. The middle contains newspaper, steel wool, copper carbonate and salt, these materials all provide the colourants. The rest is then filled with more sawdust, thicker wood shavings, and a fire is then made on top.



The final pieces and tests that came out of the smoke firing were really successful. The colours and patterns were strong and rich, and combined with the bur-nished surface they really stood out. After this first firing I was excited and sure that smoke firing was the best route to go down to create my pieces.





Along with some bigger pieces, I made and fired a series of small tusks, testing out sgraffito, slip and burnishing without terra sigillata. I found that the pieces I tried firing with slip on didn't take very well to the firing, and weren't very affected by the process, giving slightly disappointing results.

After the firing I began looking at statistics of elephant poaching, I wanted to work out how to include the numbers in my work. I also started to look more at scale. The pieces I fired first were a smaller series, but for the final work I wanted something more impactful and life size. I started to make the tusks on the throwing wheel in stages, so that they could be bigger and taller, without collapsing during the making.





With some of the tusks, I wanted to try burning illustrations onto the pieces. By attaching newspaper figures with wire, the hope was that when they were in the firing, the newspaper would create smoked patches onto the work and create shadow like imagery. However this test was unsuccessful, and the images created were very faint.





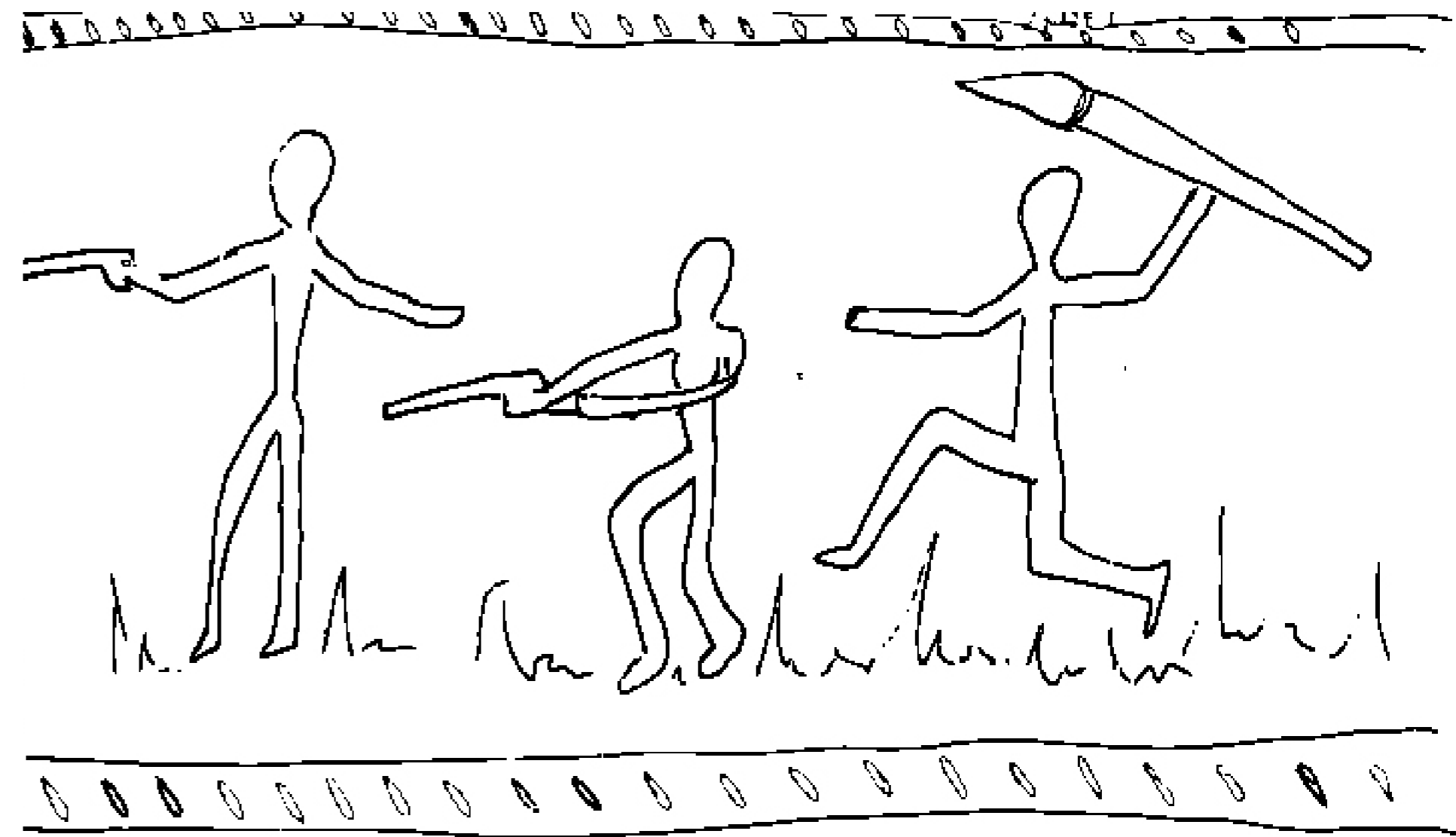
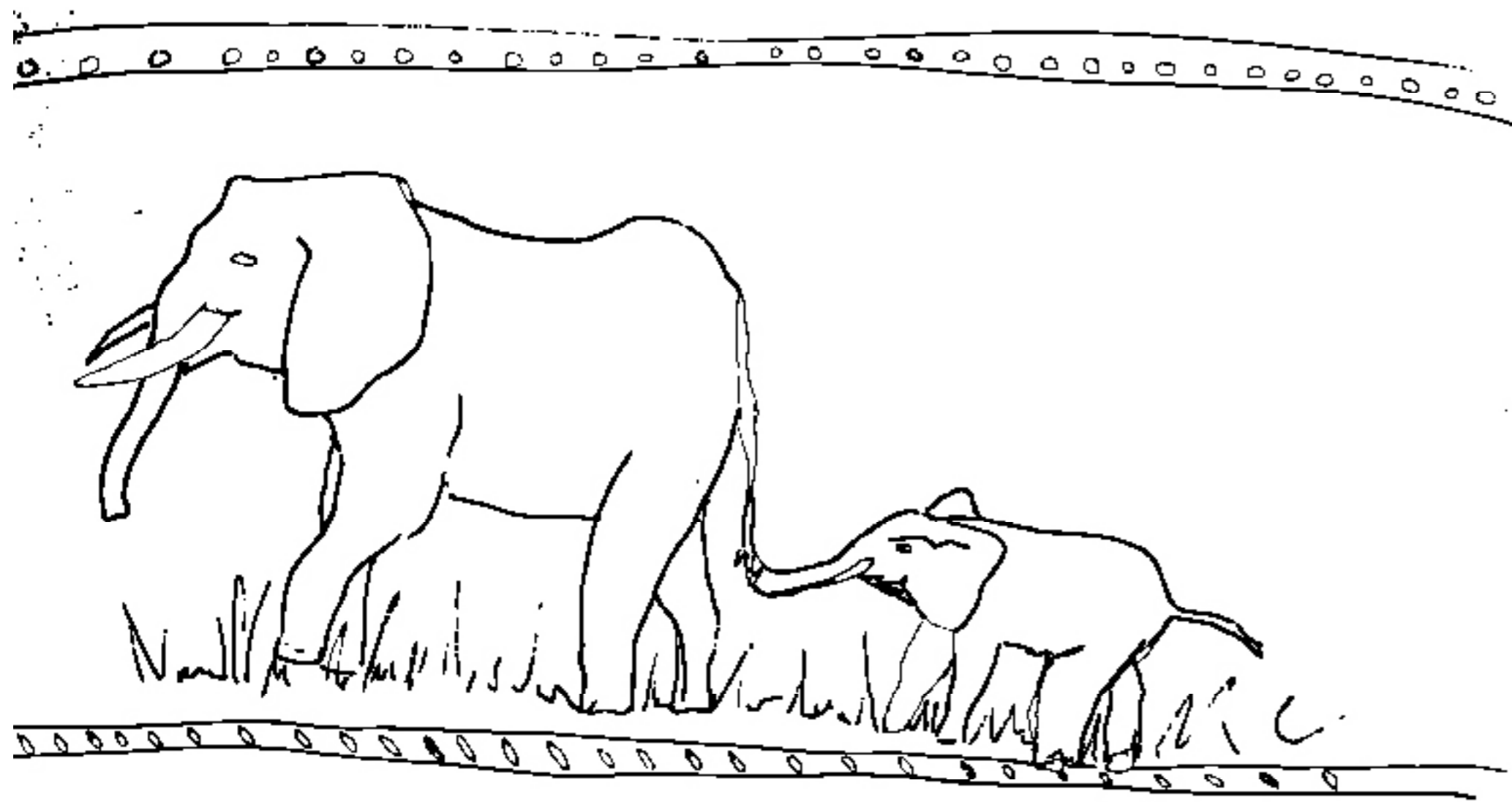
For the second firing all of my pieces were much taller than the first. I underestimated the height of the dustbin kiln, and one of the tusks was too tall and coming out of the top. It was a really windy day when I undertook this firing, and the kiln burnt out very quickly. A lot of air was getting into the kiln because of the tusks being too tall and the lid not fitting on properly.

Because of this I ended up with a lot of breakages. I found that where I had attached the wire for the images, big cracks had appeared while they were fired, this meant that as the ceramic was heating and expanding it was being trapped by the wire and creating weaknesses. Although this was a very unsuccessful firing, it was also a big learning curve.



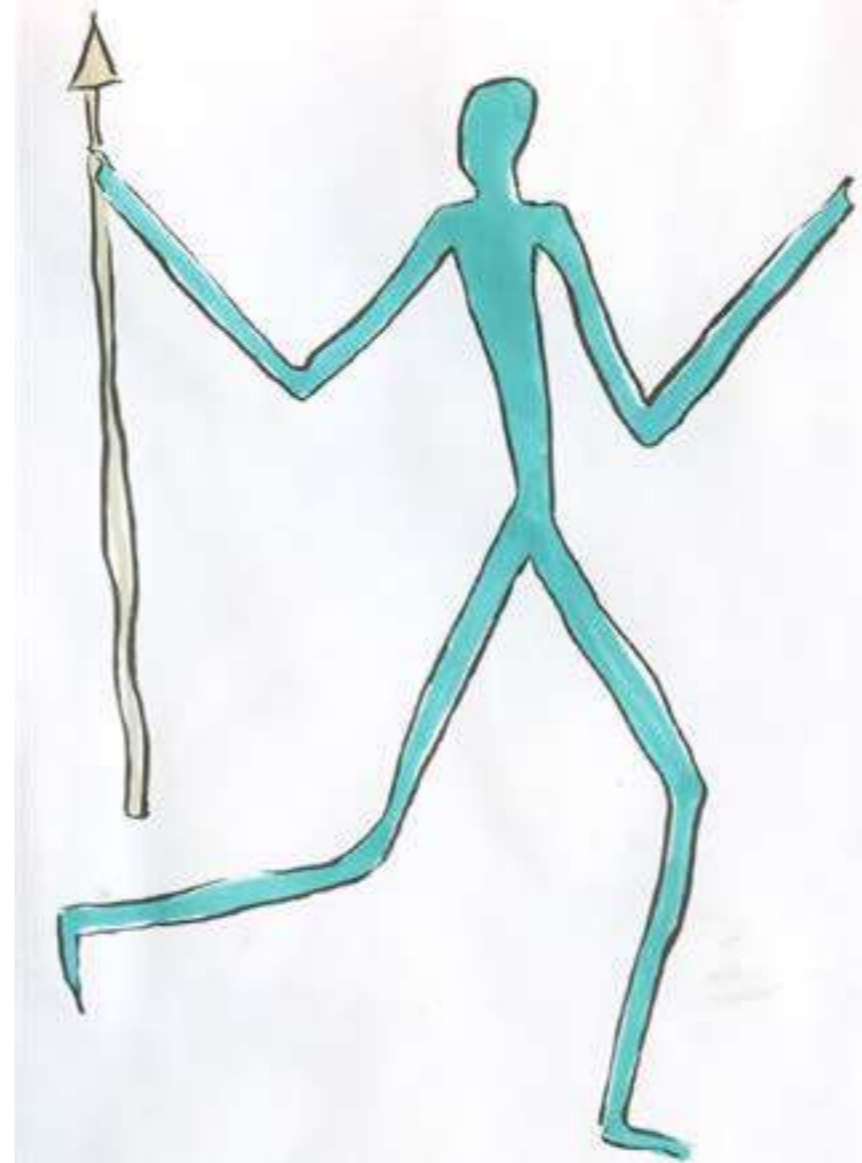
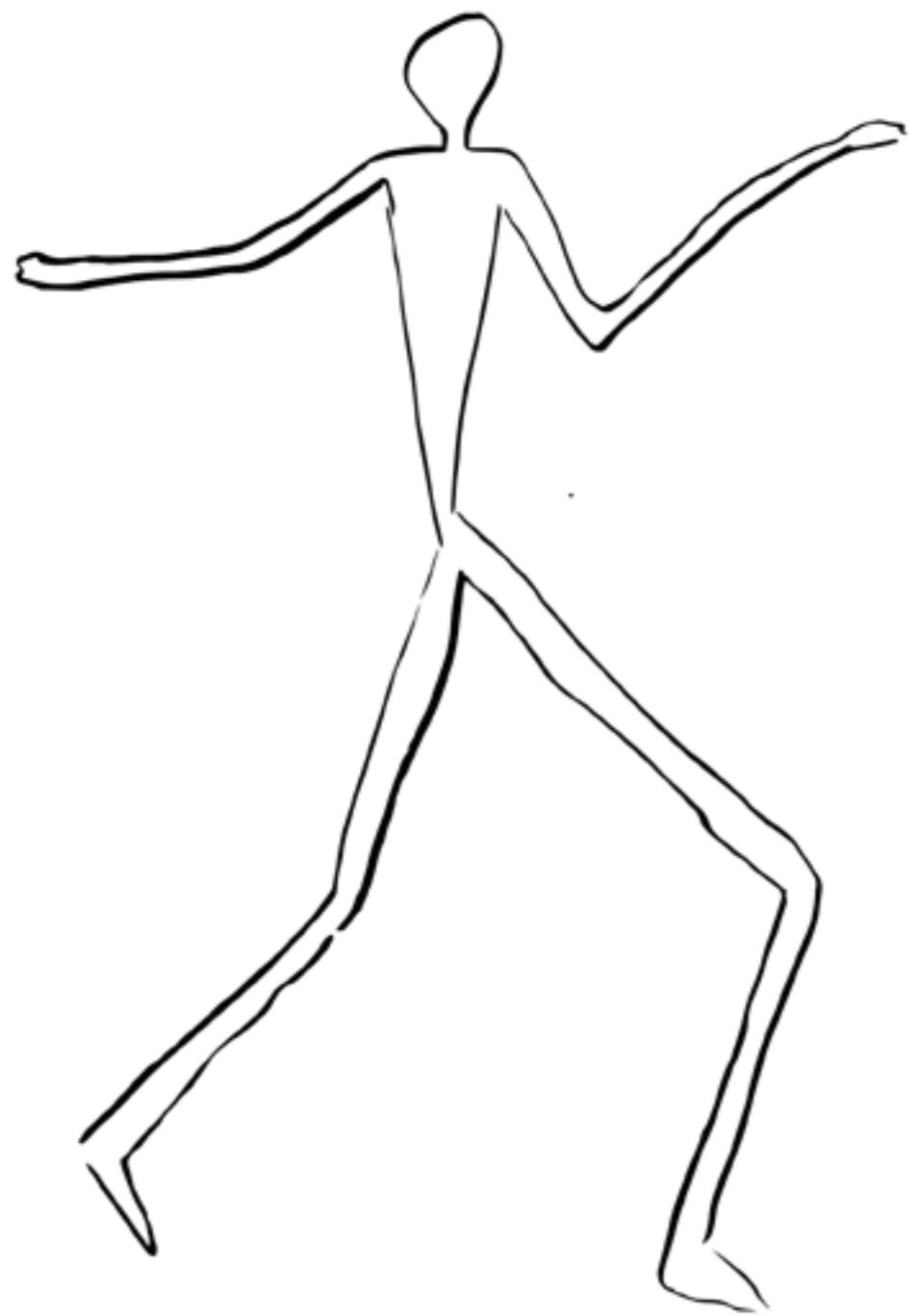
*Snake fired colour tests*







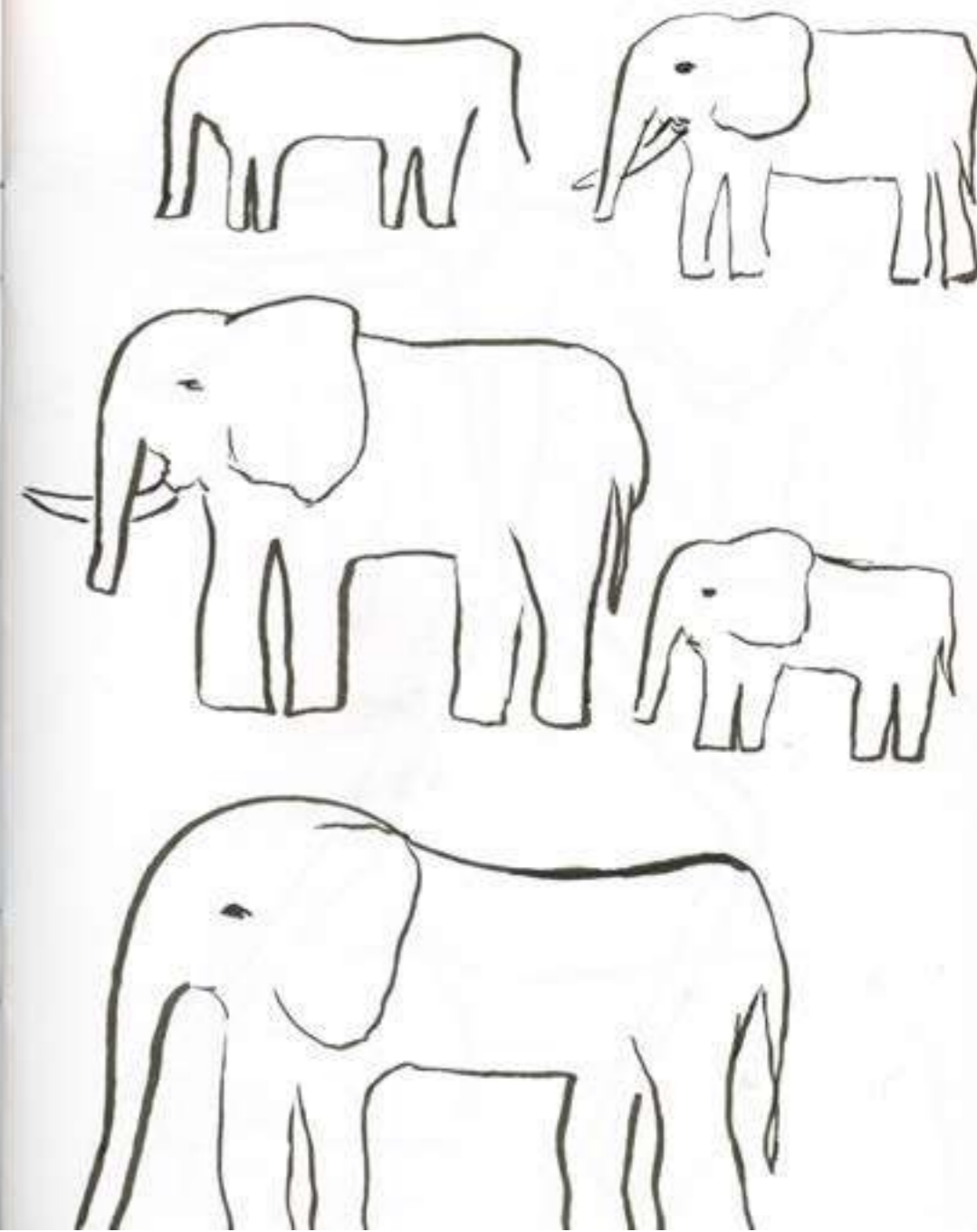
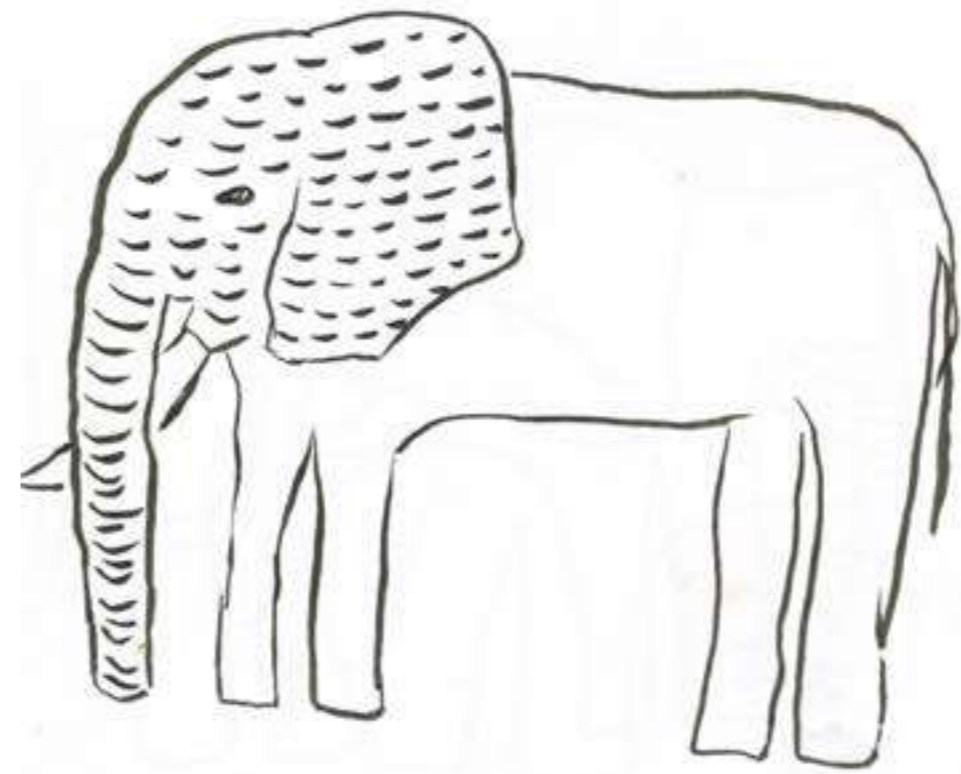
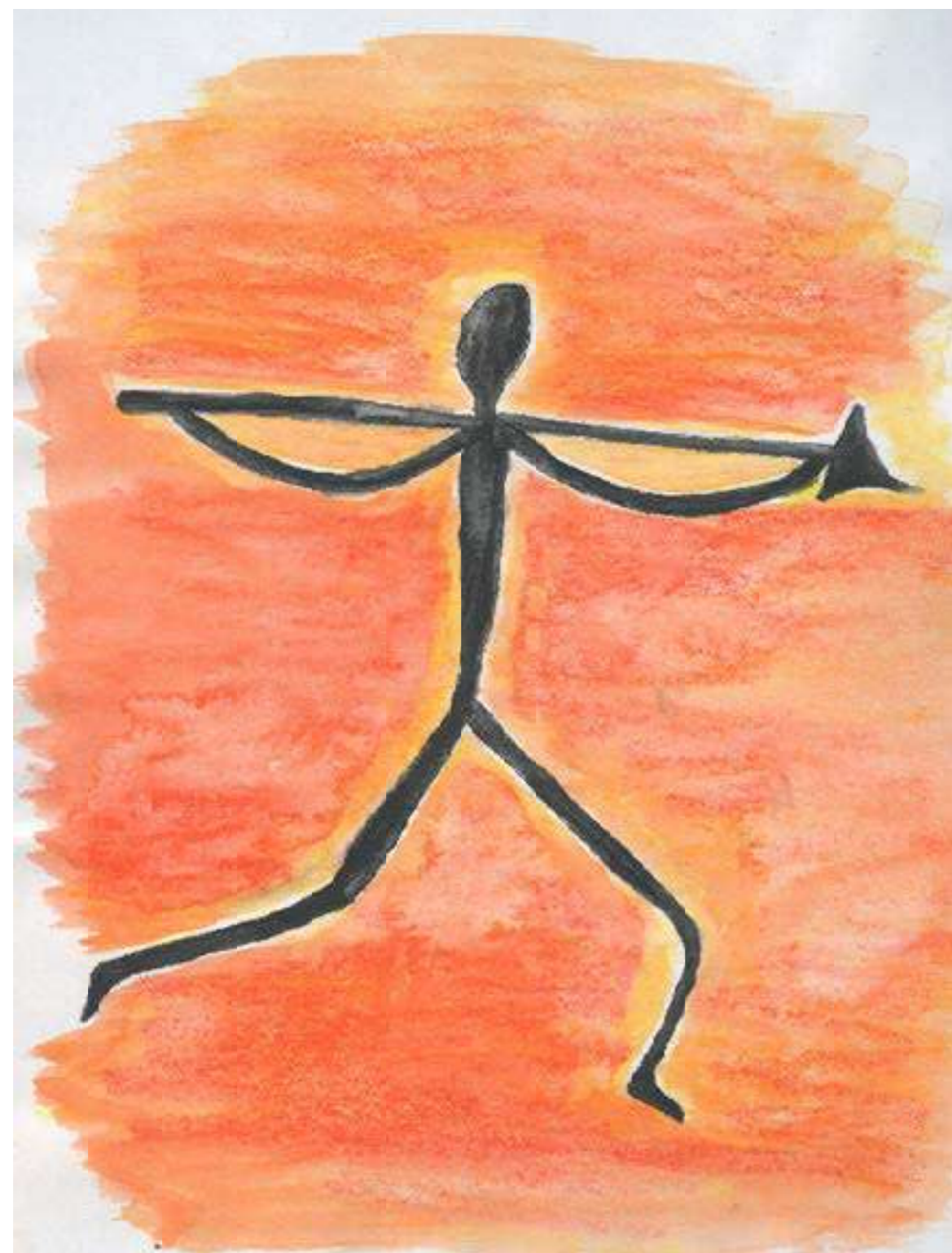
I did a lot of drawing and illustration experimentation throughout. The images on the tusks needed to be right, and show clearly and simply the message behind my project. I played around a lot with the cave painting style, I found this to be the most effective for showing meaning and stories, without being too complex and crowding on the work.

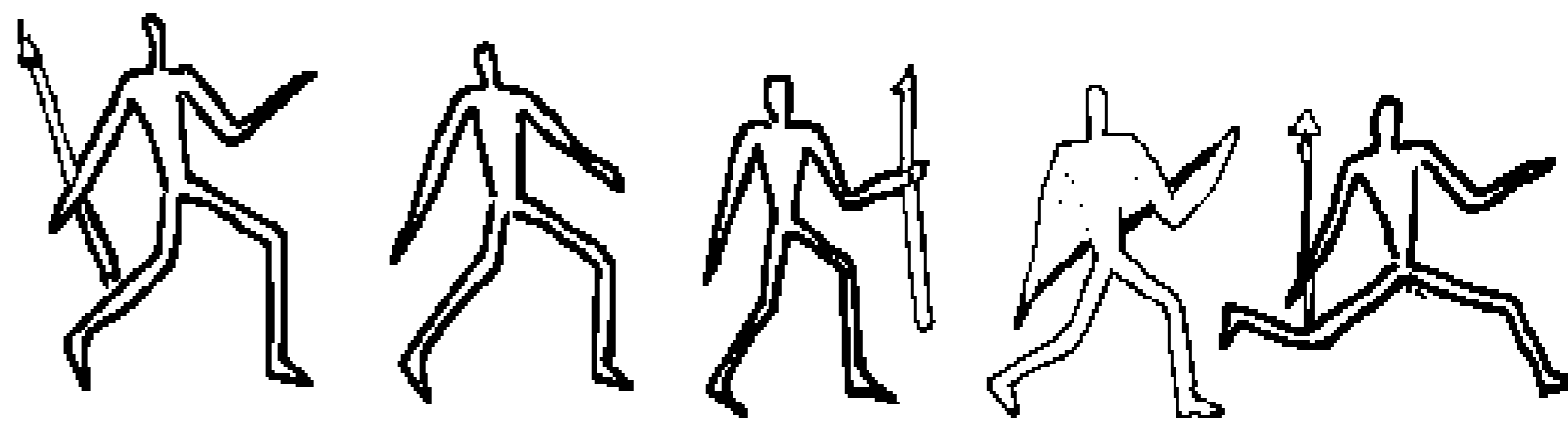
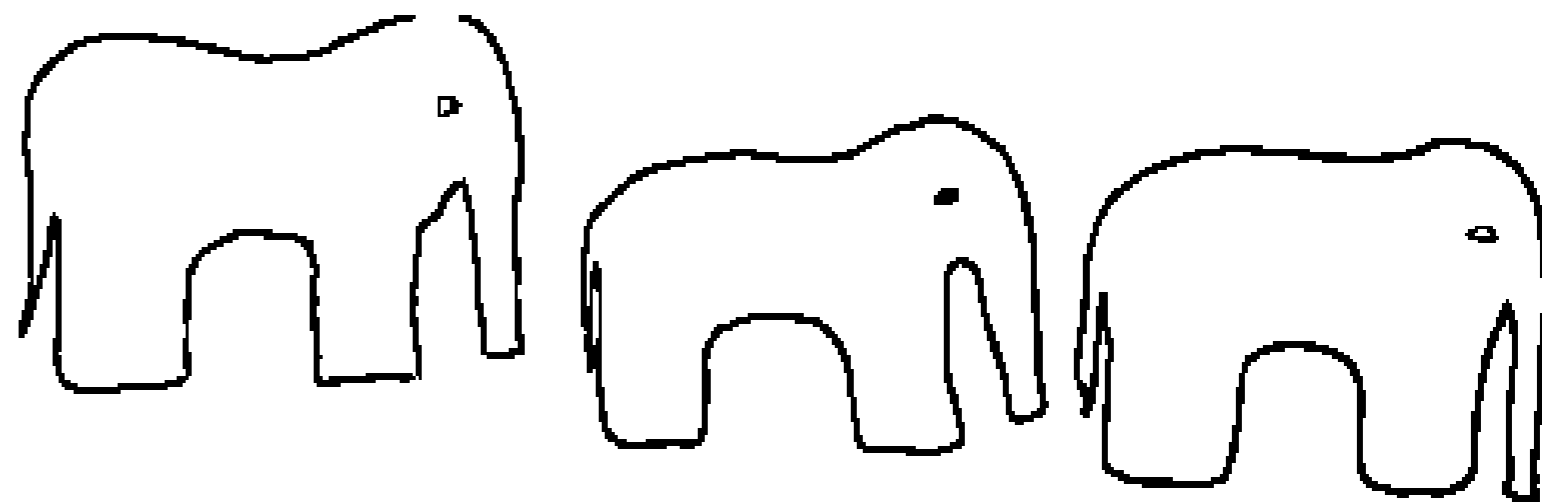
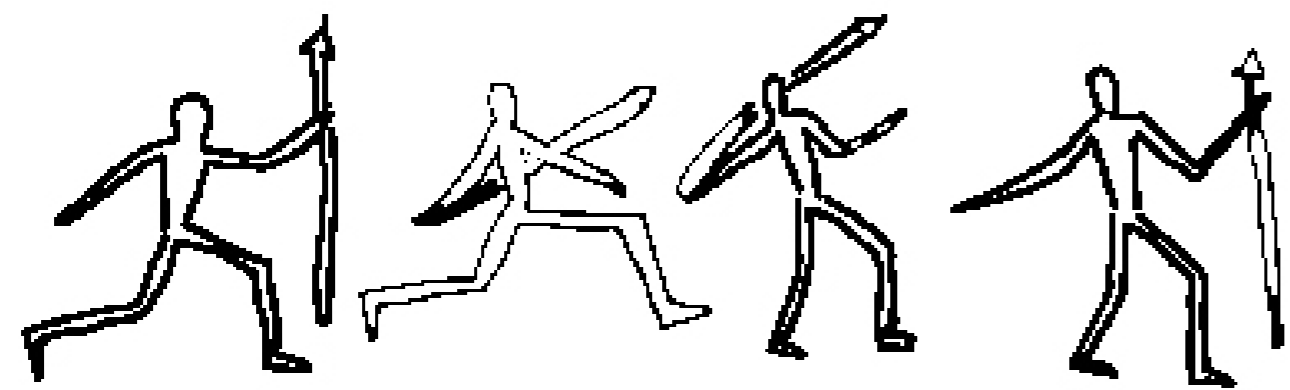




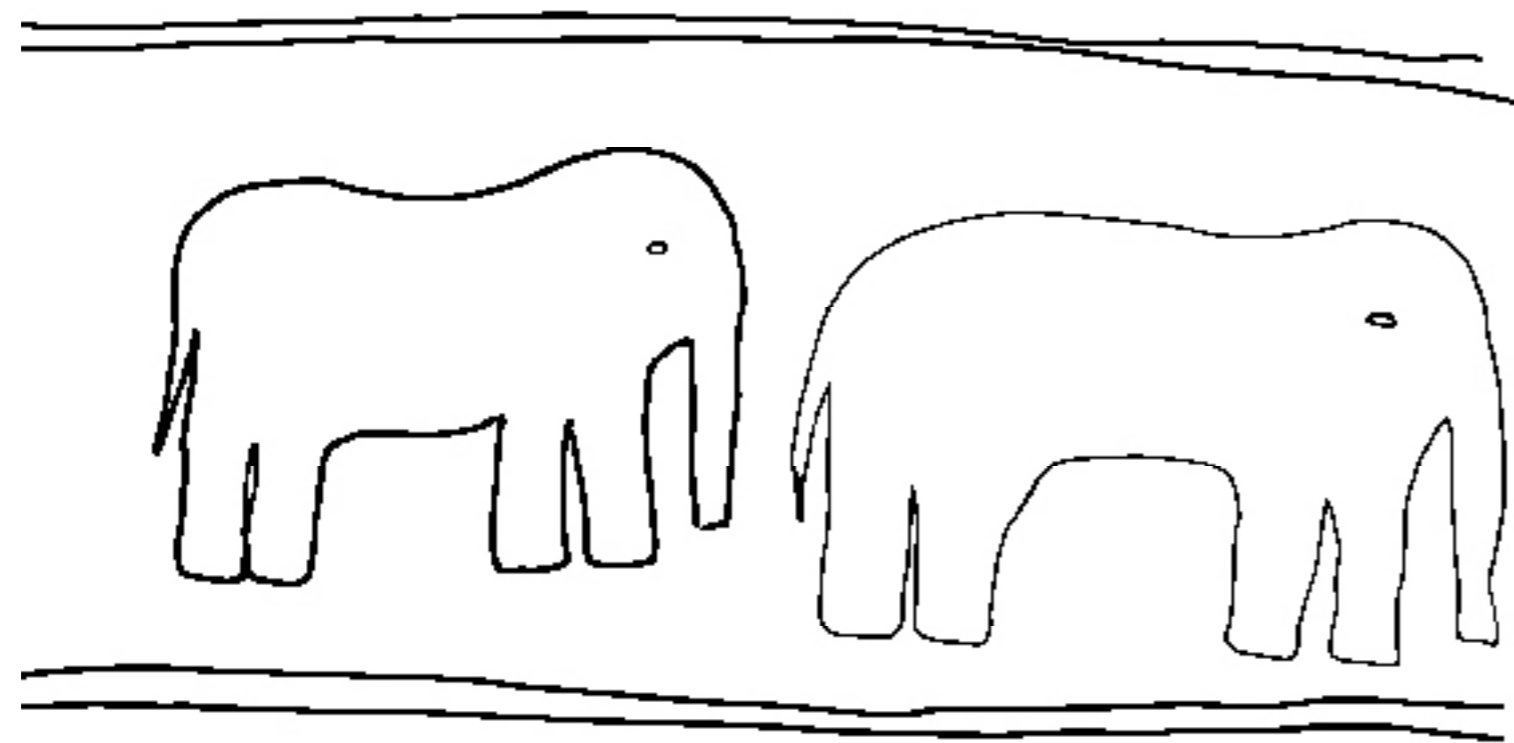
The next series of tusk I made were all going to be illustrated on to, so I worked on getting the base of the shape the right size for my images.

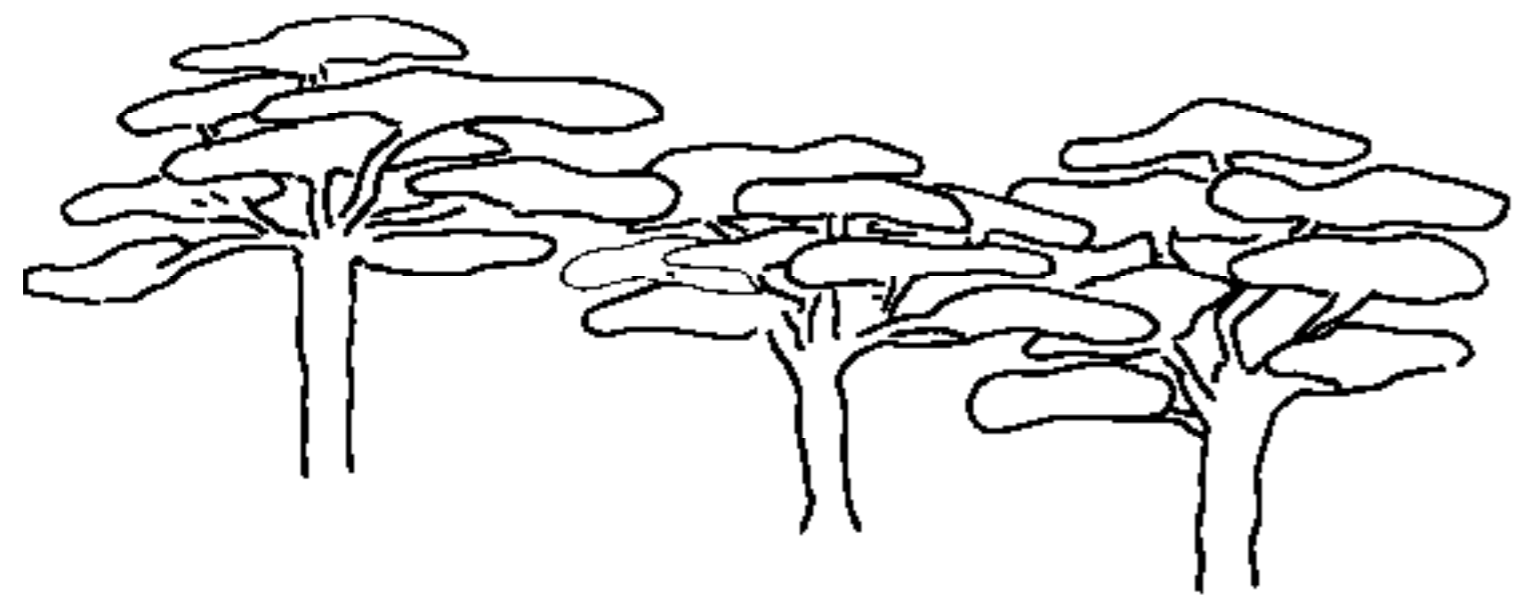
First I drew on the images with a ceramic pencil, and then went over the images with an oxide watercolour paint.

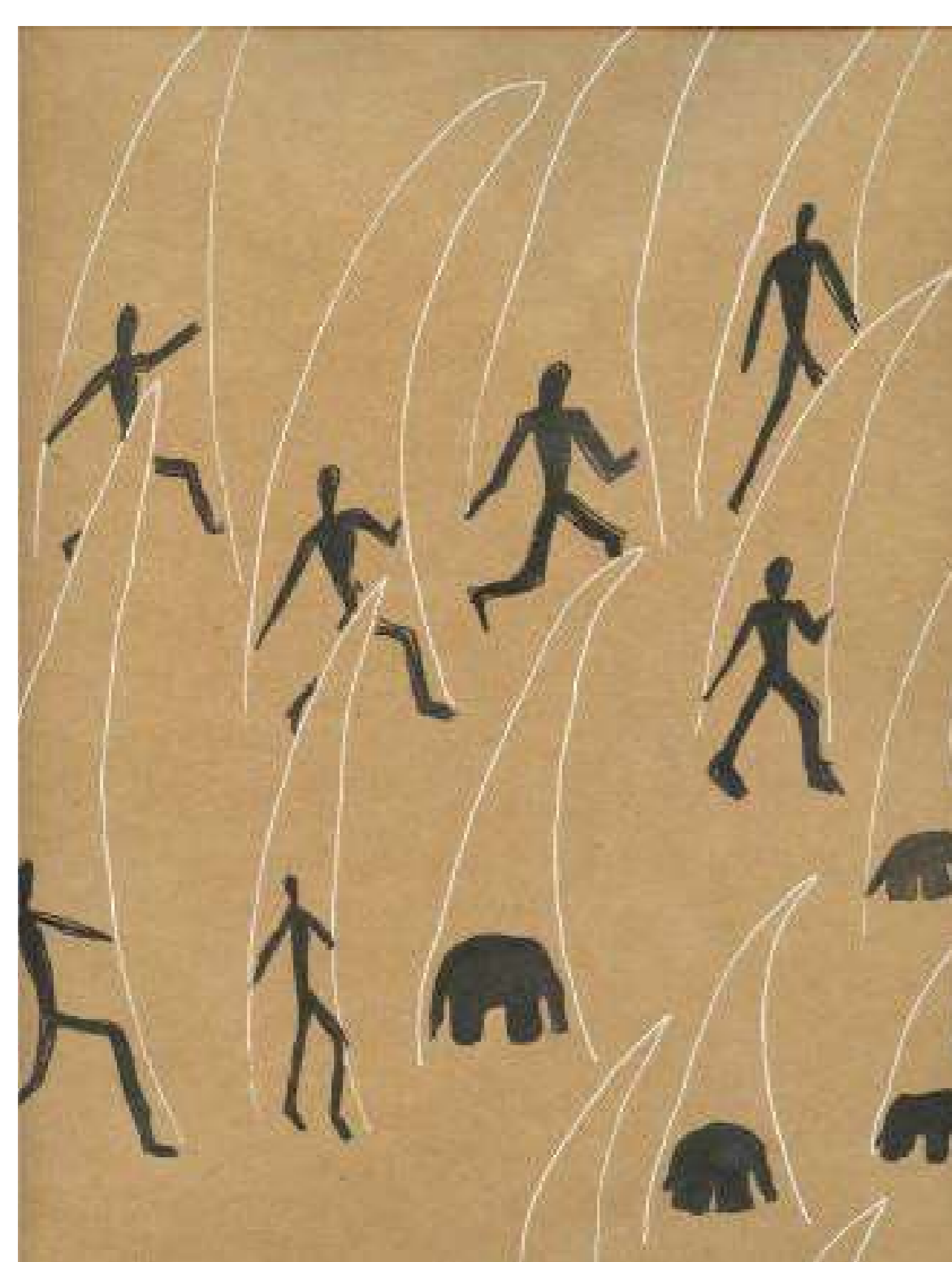












*Display plans for the tasks..*





Smoke firing the first set of my final pieces. There were 12 tusks to be fired, but only 4 of these were small enough to fit into my dustbin kiln. I had to make sure that there wasn't too much air getting into the kiln this time around, so covered some of the holes in the bottom on the kiln in order to calm down the draw through, and slow down the firing.

I added cow dung and banana skins into this firing to experiment with other natural materials as colourants.



For the rest of the taller tusks, I had to make a new dustin kiln. I decided the best way to do this was by extending an existing bin, and pot rivetting additional height onto it. I then had to drill holes into the bottom of the bin to add draw holes.

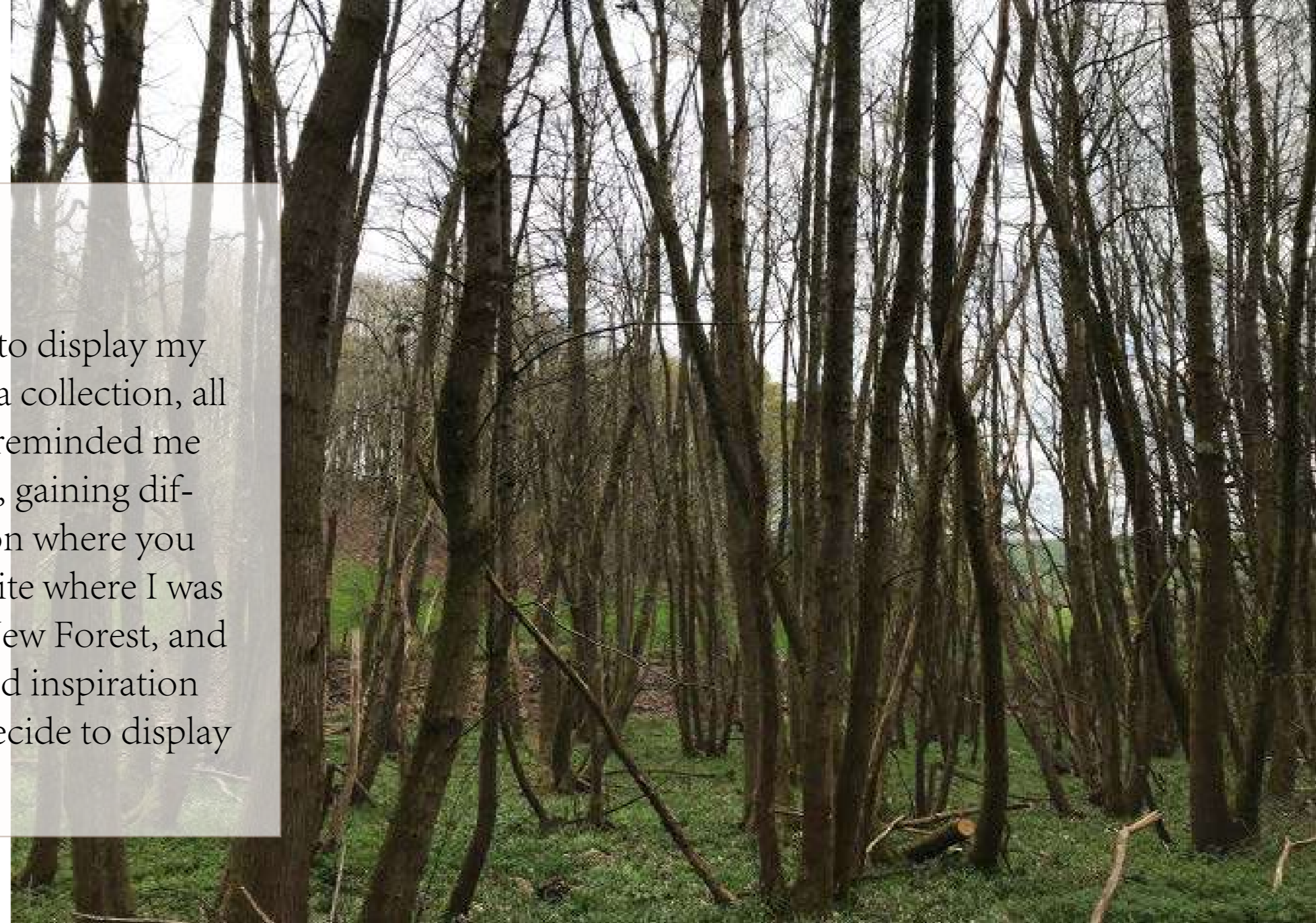


The extension worked really well, and enabled me to fire all the remaining tusks with plenty of space at the top, without any big air gaps.



## *Tusk Display*

When trying to decide on how to display my pieces, I was arranging them in a collection, all gathered at different heights. It reminded me of looking through a woodland, gaining different perspectives depending on where you are standing and looking. The site where I was smoke firing was based in the New Forest, and it was these things combined and inspiration from the forest that made me decide to display the tusks as an Ivory Forest.





Once all the tusks from the firing were out, lots of them had gone very dark and lots detail. Initially I was quite unhappy and felt the firing had gone quite negatively. However after cleaning the tusks up, I decided to polish them all with a bees wax, in the hope to bring out the colours more. This really benefited the pieces, and did make the colours and patterns show up a lot more clearly.





For the next part of my project I've been making a series of pots which are thrown on the wheel, burnished, decorated with coloured slip and then the illustrations are created using sgraffito. I wanted to do these pots as an addition to the tusks, to show other techniques and forms,

but still holding the same message. As the tusk imagery lost some definition in the smoke firing, I feel it's important to have some work with the story and images shown more clearly.



*Fianl Smoke Fired tusks results*







## Reflection

This project and topic have been, at times, really difficult to handle. During the initial research stages I found it all quite depressing to take in, learning how bad the situation actually is and how much the elephants are suffering because of human greed was harrowing. However this research also fuelled me on further and made me even more determined to make a project and raise awareness of the appalling ivory trade. I'm really proud of my outcome, and think that the tusks I've made have got a powerful message. This year has been so important for me and my future, elephant conservation is something I will continue to fight for, and the connections I've made through doing this project have become invaluable. I will be continuing to work with Holly Budge and her charity How Many Elephants after university. And this summer I will be taking part in an elephant conservation project in Zimbabwe.