

Curator Cora Sheibani in Conversation

Louisa Guinness Gallery

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When did you feel your first piece of felt?

I think it must have been 'fuzzy felt' when I was a little girl. I was obsessed. As a child I did endless embroidery and tapestry, and sewed 3D objects like forests out of felt and metal threads. I was interested in Russian literature. I made forests of silver birch.

I have always sewn words and poems in to the hems of my clothes, carried them around in my pocket, sewn them in to my duvet cover and pillow case at school, written words out or sewn them in to beautiful things that had plain exteriors but were boundlessly rich and beautiful inside.

I wrote a diary in to which I would put sewing, elaborate plans for things I would make. It stopped me having the need to talk to people much. I felt like I was a camera. A lot of these things were made of felt, of course. And wool and canvas.

Do you think there is a reason felt (the fabric) and felt (past tense of feel) are the same word?

I don't. But a thing I like about felt apart from the dry feel of it between my fingers, and the weight of it in my hands, and the resistance of it, and the fact that you can sew it, pin it, glue it, fold it, stick it cannibalistically one piece against another and it will stay, is that it has been reconstituted from scraps of other fabric. I like that it is so humble. It makes me feel happy to have felt around me. I feel like Mrs Delaunay when I cut it up. She is a great hero of mine.

When I made that forest for Canongate publishing, for example, I felt so content superimposing it one piece on top of another. It seemed splendidly opulent to me, all that stiff colour, and I liked making something that was so apparently childish and at the same time each fruit, each word, each tree, each form of each grass and flower had a symbolic meaning, so it was like a medieval garden, or the wonderful 30/20 BC dining room of Livia, wife of the Emperor Augustus in the Palazzo Massimo.

I am a great lover of the late 19th century Austrian philosopher/art historian Alois Riegl who says that it's the viewers 'aufmerksamkeit' which makes an objects worth. So, felt is whatever you would like it to be. Its whatever it means to whoever is looking at it.

What do you like about all the different types of paper that you use in your work?

I am interested in the sensuality of paper and fabrics (and things in general). I like papers that come from different places. I like the different smells of papers, the various ways particular papers feel under my nib. The whole experience of drawing in ink on paper is wonderful to me.

Since I am so interested in pens and papers and inks and pencils, people bring them to me from their travels. I am so lucky. The different provenances of things contribute to my thinking about the work I am making, and influences what I might make. I have paper inscribed with prayers from Tibet, which was made to be hung out in the air so that the prayers would be carried to the gods by the breeze. I use that for drawings that are wishing for something.

Have you ever thought of making your own paper?

I have, and I have tried, but so far my feeling is that with three small children and a visceral need to create visual work, the few hours in my day are best spent actually drawing and thinking and making rather than making what would probably be pretty crappy paper and going home upset and feeling like Abdullah in Tintin. I am really happy with all the different papers I have. I love them. I use really glorious paper, from all over the world. What could be better, at this stage, for me?

You used to use only other people's words in your work. Now the words are your own, what brought on this change of confidence?

I went to Jerusalem a few years ago and it was an experience that changed my whole life. I came back from this trip confident and without fear. Also it underlined to me my own insignificance, something that, along with death, is at the core of our every day life, and which I live with happily since then. As Milan Kundera says, "Since the insignificance of things is our lot, we should not bear it as an affliction but learn to enjoy it." This is super Taoist of course, and appeals to the Chinese side of my character.

So I stopped being self-conscious, which is a complete waste of time, anyway, stopped writing my diary, and started talking to people, communicating.

I am interested in participating in life. That is what I would like to do with my work. I want to hold a candle up to what I love and see, and share it.

How come you decided to make visual art work with words rather than just become a poet.

Music is very important to me, and I have always loved the Wagnerian ideal, which Van Gogh also attained to, of the gesamtkunstheit. Like the Bond villain Scaramanga in “The Man with the Golden Gun”, which I watched yesterday with my children, “I want to create one indisputable masterpiece”. That is what I am working towards. I should like that to include visual work, poetry, sound, for the work to be a totally immersive experience. That is what I am planning to do with the rhubarb work I have in mind at the moment.

The strings of texts in your work, are they poems? They remind me of the work of some other artists, who are your main influences if any? Do you feel a closer affinity to poets or visual artist?

I suppose that my main influence is the natural world, and the world I see around me every day in London and when I travel, in the papers, at museums, the stuff people bring me back from their travels, my children, the people I love.

I am influenced by my general culture, a lot of which is literature-based, of course, and I would say mainly by the Chinese literary tradition of writing on objects, which is at the stem of all my work, and the Chinese literati way of life, which seems peculiarly familiar to me, and which is why I studied Chinese at university. I guess I am a poet and a visual artist, as well as a lot of other things too, a mother, a friend, a woman who likes to lie on the grass with her eyes closed and feel the warmth of the day.

Your work with newspaper clippings reminds of your earlier work that is inspired by the Chinese tradition of artist writing on top of other artist’s work. Would you remind me of how art in China evolved and how this fascinates you?

In China a civilised person would keep his art objects closed up in boxes, rolled up in scrolls, “hidden away” as it were. The works were considered so potent that one would not dilly dally with them hanging on the walls or out on tables to be admired. A scholarly person would take an object out and view it carefully, experience it, give it his full attention, and then would often inscribe the way this object made him feel on the object itself.

An historic object might therefore be littered with scores of inscriptions by the time it comes to us in 2014. The 18th century Emperor Qianlong for example wrote eighty times or so on his favourite painting, explaining how he felt about it, why, what had changed since the last time he wrote on it, etc.

The Chinese considered this tradition of writing on an object made it more valuable. The idea is I feel, like Alois Riegl perhaps, that an object is interesting for what it represents in the viewers mind. We come to our life with our own inner textuality, I suppose, and I like to make that visible in the Chinese way.

The collaborative work you made for your last show in London was full of strong references towards your connection with China and Chinese art. I feel this is less obvious in your recent work, would you agree?

The Chinese art historical and literary influence on my work is at the core of my work. It is perhaps so overwhelmingly strong that it does not need to show overtly any more.

You use a lot of reference in your work, especially in the Tree series. Could tell us how this series came about and what they refer to?

After Jerusalem, like you I wondered why I was working as a visual artist and not a poet or a writer. So I started to look at visual artists who were dealing with powerful subjects they found it difficult to express. I ended up pretty quickly with the painters of the late Gothic/early renaissance period, and their paintings of religious events.

The tradition at the time was not to presume to put feelings on the faces of saints and martyrs, and so instead the saints were martyred against a backdrop of what are often wildly expressionistic symbolic landscapes.

I decided to do portraits of the inarticulacy of other artists, through doing my own portraits of the trees in these symbolic landscapes. It reconciled me to my own clumsiness and inarticulacy. Words are like garden implements to us sometimes, and we are trying to make filigree. This work taught me to relax about that and just be happy to do my best.

My work is mainly concerned with intimacy, and the unexpressed, the things that you have to find out beneath the main text. Questions of interpretation. So my hundreds of tree portraits gave me an insight in to the nature of being a silent witness (something which we all are to a certain extent, even within our own lives).

Drawing endless leaves requires a lot of patience, is it a meditative process like cutting letters out of felt, would you agree?

Completely. That's right.

Back to this point about humility, which is I think a useful lesson for us all. It goes hand in hand with this sense of wonder, which I feel every instant of every day. Its something I am trying to get across through my work. The libraries of tiny books with intricate imagery, that the viewer knows are there but cannot see, the envelopes full of letters and written work, but which are impossible to access without destroying the composition of the surface whole, are my way of hoping that people can just enjoy things without trying to possess them, even by resting their eyes on them. In this increasingly materialistic world I want my work to be a haven of calm and quietness, inside the very mind of the viewer. I want the viewer to move inside their own imagination and see things for their own perspective. That is the philosophy behind Chinese works like landscape paintings, viewing rocks, calligraphy. You discover yourself.

I know you hate the idea of ever having an assistant help you with this should you need to produce work faster, what is the reason behind this?

I don't see the point, for me, in trying to make visual work if I don't do it myself. I love my work. My work, singing, playing with my children, are some things I would like to do myself. It is my pleasure. I really mean everything I do in my work, it keeps me centred. I want the viewer to have the best of what I, me, personally, have to give.

I know Bjork is a fan of your work, what kind of music you do like and listen to. Do songs influence you ever as much as poems?

I listen to music. I love music. My favourite music for the past few years has been disco, really commercial mainstream pop music like Enrique Iglesias, George Gershwin, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Bjork, Poulenc, and Bach in particular. With classical music I like to listen to it live, so in my studio where there is only a stereo (I am working on da Vinci's live music) I do a lot of disco dancing and keep happy. I did a series of work using the lyrics to pop songs. I called it "Pop Music is the Only Truth" and I wrote my diary all around the lyrics in poem form.

Poetry is everywhere. Beauty is everywhere. No great artist is a snob. If Shakespeare were alive today I like to think he would be working with "Take That" on their lyrics.

One of your series is called Moon, and like the Tree series some of the art work contains no words at all

The Chinese were always writing love letters to the moon. Too right. It's one of the most beautiful things in the world. So I write love letters to the moon, and to the earth, too. I would like my whole life to be a sort of love letter to being alive.