

FREYA DOOLEY



Angelica Sule

Encountering Freya Dooley's work is like losing your footing in time, tripping into a fragmented story that sits on the edge of familiarity. Through sound, moving image, performance and installation, Dooley weaves complex narratives around personal, private and collective experience, building intimate worlds so that we can live vicariously through the characters she brings to life. The ultimate act of ventriloquy, her work draws us into different bodies – or inhabits our own – planting thoughts and sensations through carefully composed scripts and soundscapes.

Being with Dooley's work brings a sharp focus to your immediate environment: a cacophony of hums, buzzes, clicks; I feel the crackle of a radio, an electric tingle on the roof of my mouth. The soft *sshhhhhhush* of the rain lingers as a lulling backdrop from the soundscape of *Temporary Commons* (2021). Each moment draws attention to the details around you and to how your body encounters the world through them, like noticing the hum of a fridge only when it stops. The work is made to be felt, sensed, from the vibrations in your chest to a prickle at your fingertips.

Voice sits at the centre of every work Dooley makes, with her soft and rhythmic lilt narrating words alongside other voices, some of whom

make guest appearances and others who she works with in more intimate collaboration. She uses her own voice as a tool to find her way through a piece, testing out different rhythms, iterating lines and honing language as it is spoken aloud. Dooley has played with the difference between singular and multiple voices, layering foley effects and soundtracks to build complex pieces that reference radio plays, stand-up comedy, fictionalised experiences and conversations with friends. Through these works she picks apart the nuances of existing in the world: big thinking next to banal realities, the minute detail of private narratives expanding into something operatic.

Language partners voice in Dooley's work and is built and paced through meticulous scripting. She picks sentences apart to emphasise single words or phrases, repeating and intoning them until they take on new meaning. Working with multiple readings and re-readings, the rehearsal of a memorised script is both the process and the subject of her performance *The Understudy* (2019). In *Ventriloquy for Radio* (2020), thoughts become conversations by dissecting monologues and transforming them into dialogue. Voices switch places and stretch in scale as language is folded and layered. Her use of language and voice draw parallels to composer Alvin Lucier and his experiments with





looping, recording and rerecording. Dooley has the same sense of testing out loud, of feeling how sound as a material moves and vibrates in physical space, playing with the difference between what is live and recorded. Dooley tests multiple forms of voice, stripping it back to the singular vocal in a live performance or layering multiple voices and chords to create a symphonic soundscape.

In *Somewhere in the Crowd There's You* (2019), a four-channel audio installation is hosted in a room lit in a soft pink, with textured underlay flooring and walls scattered with collaged patterns of legs caught in synchronised movement. The audio shifts between a harmonious tangle of layered voices to what feels like snippets of a rehearsal, complete with coughing and snide remarks about someone singing off-key. Initially sounding like a choral performance, refrains and phrases become audible, familiar but out of their usual rhythm. Then the penny drops – *you can dance, you can dance* – looping amid a symphony of competing voices, building to a crescendo of discordant harmony. The piece is a homage to an earworm Dooley could not rid herself of for years – the song 'Super Trooper' by ABBA (1980). Dooley's work deconstructs the song, and with it the happy veneer of the group, to reveal the disharmony that eventually led to their break-up. In a poignant footnote, ABBA has just reformed, completing the cycle at the core of the work: an eternal pop refrain echoing beyond the piece into reality.

Skimming the boundary between reality and fiction is something Dooley has perfected through creating surreal situations and places. Though her works often describe physical space, the installations in which they are situated are not those same rooms or buildings. They are carpeted and darkened, sometimes with coloured light and accompanied by wallpaper or large-scale print. What they offer is a rupture to your environment, the experience of crossing a threshold into something completely other. You are immediately pulled into a different state, a different mindset: a place for you to insert yourself fully into that space and time and for Dooley to insert herself fully into your thinking. It is a mutual engagement, a safe release into her soothing voice.

However, just as you are lulled into safety, the work forces a confrontation with the sometimes uncomfortable realities of living, particularly to our often precarious conditions. Our anxieties and paranoias become the backdrop of Dooley's earworm pop, amplifying both the trivialities and enormities of the day-to-day. Laying bare the horror of insomnia next to the banality of mouth ulcers and overheard neighbours, her practice highlights the strain of the mundane in excruciating detail. By magnifying our concerns she focuses our attention on issues of health, security and moments of crisis. Here, the personal is played out in public, telling us we are not alone in our boredom or loneliness. Dooley bounces us between singular and collective voice to remind us that we exist together, even in the moments where we feel most alone.

So this is where I want to stay, listening to Dooley's soft staccato rhythm that jumps and skips a beat, pulling me along to a jolting halt or changing tack, weaving another thread. Because it is all storytelling and storytelling at its best is the kind where you don't know you are in a story. You are following, but then suddenly you are not ...

Freya Dooley is an artist working across writing, moving image, performance and sound.

Angelica Sule is Programme Director, Site Gallery, Sheffield.

List of Works



p.79 top: Freya Dooley, *Temporary Commons*, six-channel sound installation, large-scale digital print, bespoke seating, blue lighting, acrylic paint, 42 min, 2021. Commissioned for Jerwood Solo Presentations, Jerwood Arts, London and supported by Arts Council of Wales. Photo: Anna Arca

bottom: Freya Dooley, *Temporary Commons*, print installation detail, 2021. Commissioned for Jerwood Solo Presentations, Jerwood Arts, London and supported by Arts Council of Wales. Photo: Anna Arca

p.81 Freya Dooley, *The Understudy*, performance, 25 min, South London Gallery, 2020. Commissioned for New Writing with New Contemporaries. Photo: Samuel Nightingale

p.82 top: Freya Dooley, *Scenes from Between the Mountains and the Sea*, HD single-channel film with stereo sound, installation view, Beppu, Japan, 16 min, 2020. Commissioned by Beppu Project, Japan and supported by Wales Arts International. Photo: Masayo Momijiya

bottom: Freya Dooley, *Scenes from Between the Mountains and the Sea* (still), HD single-channel film with stereo sound, 16 min, 2020. Commissioned by Beppu Project, Japan and supported by Wales Arts International.

p.83 top, middle, bottom: Freya Dooley, *The Eavesdropper*, five-screen installation of single channel HD film with stereo sound, 22 min, 2021. Commissioned for Green Man Festival, Powys and supported by Arts Council of Wales, Arts Council England and Green Man Trust. Photo: Anna Arca

p.86 top: Freya Dooley, *Somewhere in the Crowd There's You*, four-channel sound installation, underlay flooring, pink lighting, risograph collage, 2019. Commissioned by Eastside Projects, Birmingham and supported by Arts Council of Wales. Photo: Stuart Whipps

bottom: Freya Dooley, *Somewhere in the Crowd There's You*, four-channel sound installation, underlay flooring, pink lighting, risograph collage, 2019. Commissioned by Eastside Projects, Birmingham and supported by Arts Council of Wales. Photo: Zunaira Muzaffar



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