

Christine Borland interviewed by Rosie Lesso



Christine Borland
Choking Charlie from the
'NoBodies' series 2009
video still

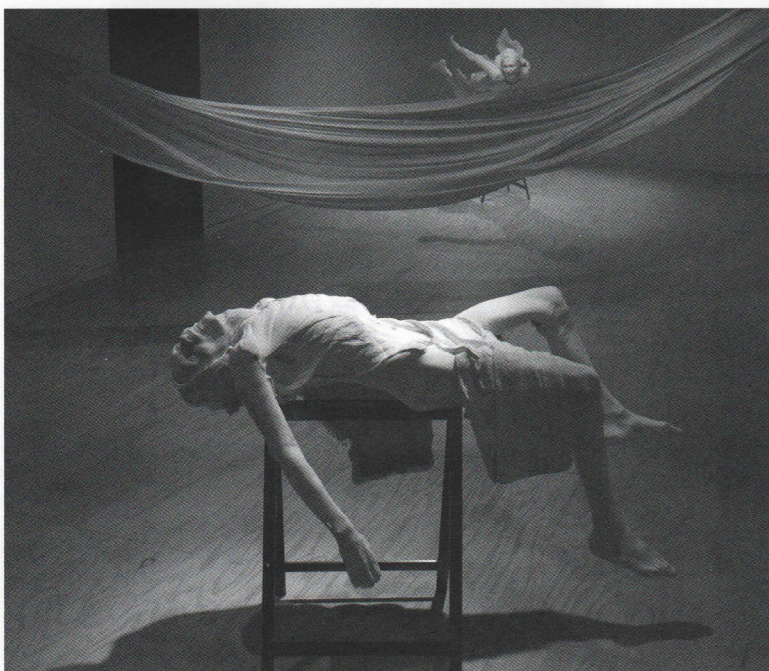
Ghosts

Rosie Lesso: Your current exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, 'Cast from Nature', is the culmination of work completed during nine months in residence at Glasgow Sculpture Studios (GSS). I understand you encountered a sculpture at the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS) in Edinburgh which would become the starting point for your work during the residency.

Christine Borland: I had visited the Royal College of Surgeons some time before and encountered a figure which is a centrepiece in the exhibition space at Surgeons' Hall, a fibreglass cast sculpture of a flayed, partially dissected figure. There are several labels on the sculpture, one of which reads, 'Cast from Nature 1845', and which attributes the dissection and presumably the sculpture to Sir John Goodsir, who was head of anatomy at Edinburgh University in the mid 19th century. Another label indicates that the fibreglass replica of the original plaster cast was commissioned by the National Museums of Scotland in 1986. I made some initial enquiries about the original sculpture – where it was, who made it, who the subject was and if any original moulds existed. The short answer to all those questions was: 'Don't know!' So the initial enquiry led nowhere.

But you persevered, in spite of the lack of information?

I left it for a while, which is the way I like to work; to be intrigued by a subject and have it sit at the back of my mind while I work on other things, then to revisit it again after a period of time. That process suits me really well. I was invited to do a production residency at Glasgow Sculpture Studios in 2010, which I started working on last August, with a show scheduled for November. Originally I thought my starting point could be the plaster-cast heads from the 'SimBodies' and 'NoBodies' series, which were shown in 'An Entangled Bank' at the Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh in 2009, with a view to trying to cast on a more ambitious scale. But when I moved into the empty studio space it seemed to offer the chance for a clean slate, so rather



Cast from Nature 2010-11
installation views at
Glasgow Sculpture Studios

than bring previous work out of storage I decided to start afresh. In looking for new starting points, I went back to see the sculpture at the RCS and followed up on my initial questions, but without any better outcomes.

So why were you still attracted to the work when it seemed to be leading nowhere?

Perversely, that missing information, and therefore the inability to contextualise the sculpture, was definitely part of the appeal. If all the information had been a given, I think this would have just become a footnote work, leading somewhere else. The fact that it is such a striking statement in the centre of a large museum yet nobody officially seemed to be able to tell me anything about it made me want to find out more. If the purpose of the work was as an educational dissection demonstration, why choose such an extreme pose? I suspected it would have been made with an exhibition in mind but, again, for what purpose?

So where did the research process lead you?

To Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), where they have a great cast collection, including an écorché known as 'Smugglerius', which had recently been the subject of a research project, and a cast of the Christ figure from Michelangelo's *Pietà*. The positioning of the body looked very similar to the sculpture at the RCS, so I wondered if there was a chance that maybe the artist who posed *Cast from Nature* could have seen the ECA work, if not the original *Pietà*, and deliberately positioned the body in the same way. What also intrigued me about the ECA cast was that it is really just the front face which has been cast, so it doesn't have any depth. You can go right behind the beautiful, smooth, idealised surface replica and the caster's hand marks are clearly visible. In complete contrast to the front, they are really quite rough and violent, and an intimate signature of the anonymous person who made the cast.

So there is a hidden element to the work which is actually very awkward and uncomfortable, but far more real than the perfect surface of the replica, the only element we are meant to see.

Exactly. This reinforced my interest in pursuing the *Cast from Nature* original and the possibility that in making a cast, a replica, there could still be room for me in there as an artist too. As it often works out, the time spent researching this project gave me the space to develop more ideas around where I wanted it to go.

*Was it a difficult process trying to track down the original *Cast from Nature* sculpture?*

There wasn't much to be gleaned through official channels in the museums but I eventually became a right pest, asking everyone I could think of about the work. A conversation with the collections' manager at the RCS who knew all the collections in Edinburgh revealed that a similar sculpture had once been on display in the University of Edinburgh's medical school. Following up this lead, I found out that there was a vast basement in the medical school, full of specimens which had been damaged or withdrawn from display.

The sound of that place must have been very enticing to you, given that this kind of subject has informed so much of your practice over the years.

Well yes, and almost a cliché in that it was so exactly what you might expect. Behind a creaky wooden door was a dingy basement full of cobwebs and corridor after corridor filled with body fragments preserved in all kinds of ways – an amazing sight. At the end of a labyrinth of corridors was the damaged plaster sculpture of the *Cast from Nature* body. I am sure this is not the one that the fibreglass was made from as there are no traces of the process of fibreglass casting, which is quite invasive.

Do you think more work might come out of the experience in that basement at the university?

Absolutely! I really had to put blinkers on to try to stay focused on the original subject, but it was so full of possibilities. The medical school is relocating, so it is unlikely that this unloved collection will stay together. Before it goes, I would at least like to document it.

I am particularly interested in how you set this casting process up as a performance, a live feed, so viewers could watch the painstaking process of making the mould over a number of months, screened in front of a tiered seating arrangement resembling a traditional anatomy lecture theatre.

Normally artists would have a three-month residency with a five-month exhibition at the end of it, but the first three months were really spent sourcing the subject, so the format of the residency had to be changed to fit my project. The work you see in Camden Arts Centre existed here, in Glasgow, but only for a few weeks as the end result of what became a nine-month residency.

So you changed the making of the work into a performance in itself. Was this approach something you had tried before?

No. But that kind of process is something I am interested in. Take the research I do in medical schools. I have long been intrigued by the ways in which they teach communication skills now, and how the performance elements of that link to the early anatomists and the notion of the surgeon as a performer. I haven't done anything nearly as direct as the set-up here but it was born out of experience in a way.

The nature of your project sounds as if it grew and changed quite a lot during this process.

It did. And knowing the way the GSS building is used – that it is primarily a production space, studios and workshops – I felt it would be great for the artists there to encounter a project which evolved through a sculptural process. There is always a feeling that, however good the exhibitions are at GSS, you can't help but be intrigued by what is going on behind those closed doors, where the work is actually being made.

Your residency was therefore remoulded contextually to suit the creative and evolving nature of what happens in the rest of the building, which seems like a natural evolution.

Yes, that's right. If the project had always been destined only for Camden I wouldn't have built that element into the work. It is entirely appropriate here as this is a production space, but

if I was to do something similar in another venue without this context then it wouldn't sit quite so easily, it would be in danger of becoming a 'mock-up'. I would still like to unpick further elements of the theatricality of the anatomy lesson. The live feed also makes a direct reference to contemporary medical education, which is something I'll continue to explore.

It must have been strange to have been working knowing people were watching you, especially if this is something you aren't used to. Didn't you find that off-putting?

The *Big Brother* element was there but I was surprised that I could quickly accept the situation and be completely natural. I purposely built an arena with a sculptural presence because that was to be the main exhibit for the majority of the time. It wasn't a replica anatomy theatre but it was resonant of those kinds of spaces.

The relationship with medical education in this project makes me think of your exhibition at Ormeau Baths Gallery in Belfast in 2009 that you referred to earlier, 'SimBodies' and 'NoBodies', in which there was a series of works exploring the use of 'simulated patients'.

Yes, observing the teaching of communication skills in the 'safe' environment of medical schools really spoke to me of the kind of audience catharsis possible in the seminal performance pieces by artists like Chris Burden, Yoko Ono and Marina Abramović. I observed the students responding to scenarios with actor patients, like breaking the bad news of terminal diagnoses from test results.

Did the medical students you worked with find this acting part of their training hard work?

Yes, it is very stressful, and not only in a way that is inevitable as training for the real situations. These scenarios operate on so many levels. After viewing a live feed of the role play, the class hear the actor come out of character to give feedback on how they felt as 'themselves', and as their character. Within their own context no one is able to step away and see through all these layers of simulation. The students themselves are aware of these contradictions, of being taught to 'act' empathically, and usually have a desire to be themselves, to be real. It related a lot to Hal Foster and Jean Baudrillard's theories which were so much part of the discourse in which I was interested when starting out as an artist in the early 1990s.

So was that project the first in which you really explored medical teaching in any depth?

That exhibition was the starting point of using medical education as a part of my work but the research really goes back further to 2001, when I was making a commissioned public artwork installed at Glasgow University when the new medical school had just opened. I was doing research as part of the development of that project and spent time looking at the new aspects of the building, including a whole floor of suites with surveillance cameras and sound equipment transmitting live action via camera from one room to another. I also became acutely aware of the use of simulated patient manikins, which students use for the practical, clinical aspects of their training. They are nasty figurative sculptures, so difficult to relate to that the students generally have a good laugh when working with them.



Choking Charlie from the
'SimBodies and Me' series 2010
video still

'SimBodies and NoBodies'
exhibition at Ormeau Baths Gallery
2009 installation view

*Do you then see more personality in the Victorian educational medical tools that have been used so often in your work, including *Cast from Nature*?*

Since many of them were made by skilled artists, I'm certainly more drawn to them, but the problems with many of them are similar to those reflected in *Cast from Nature*, they are overtly aestheticised and emotive. I haven't found the answer – it is more about the importance of raising the question.

To move on to your current exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, how did the final display come together?

Although I work with many different materials, I usually pass the final production over to someone else, so I wouldn't normally have such a long experience with the process in the way that I have had here. So many of the discoveries made during that experience are evident in the final presentation of the work. Maybe without the opportunity of the residency I would have given the cast to someone else to do and the work would look completely different.

What kind of discoveries are you talking about?

Well, for one, the decision to show two sculptures – one facing up, one down.

What happened in the process of making which led you to this outcome?

During the mould-making you have this strange experience of creating negative space, such a long process to create a void which then needs filling. You can't help but form a very personal relationship with the subject. The positioning came from the purely practical act that to get the plaster into the mould, everything was lying face down and I instinctively knew that this different perspective was doing something very powerful.

Yes, the two Camden sculptures each trigger their own set of emotional responses just by straightforward inversion. So there is an element of simplicity, but also the complexity that the viewer brings to the work and the comparisons they intuitively make between them.

There is this allusion to freedom in the one on his front, which accentuates the deadening effect of the other pose, on his back. The swathe of fabric also accentuates this dividing line between the two sculptures. That came about because I wanted to investigate the drapery which was part of the original. In the original *Cast from Nature*, the drapery was used to preserve some kind of modesty when the most intimate details were already revealed by the dissection. My work on the fabric evolved in a very traditional way, the artist working in a studio, experimenting with sculptural materials – all quite 19th century. But this is not a way of working that I have had much previous experience with.

Would you say a less rational end result came about from this project as a result of the residency, in contrast with some of your previous work which you have made without a specific, designated studio space to work in?

Yes. But it still makes some kind of rational sense too, although the conceptual elements came together during the process.

How did you find the experience of working across two sites so closely towards the end of your residency, particularly as the work at Camden was initially shown at GSS?

The black box situation at GSS is very different from Camden's space, with all its period architectural detail and natural light. They both had a very different dramatic tension. In its current context at Camden the work is released from the very direct physical link to the process but still seems quite complete. But I didn't feel the need to show, say, slides or a film of the work being made alongside it because the process was so built in and remained visible, as evident in the hand marks and casting lines, which were left rough.

Are the materials you use always considered an important element of the final work? I am thinking about the austere white plaster in your current project, and plaster's ghostly qualities, as well as its ability to replicate.

Plaster has such a historical reference that just by choosing it as a material you can say a huge amount. The sentiment always sticks in my mind from a piece of carved marble by Ian Hamilton Finlay in Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow, which says 'clay the life, plaster the death, marble the revolution', which sums up how I read those materials. The fact that plaster comes from the earth and has this amazing chemical ability to change from rock to liquid and back to a hard material, and this ability to create a ghost – a second life through death – makes it work in so many ways for me.

And I suppose the film you made for the RSA Morton Award, which documented elements of your *Cast from Nature* sculpture being made, also exploited the unique properties of plaster, with condensation gathering on the glass next to it as the plaster warmed during the setting process. It was as if it was breath coming from the sculpture.

That original idea came about by accident when I was working in a freezing old church as a temporary studio on head casts for the 'SimBodies' and 'NoBodies' series. I could feel the plaster was still warm when I took it from the mould, so I put a glass jar over it. The obscuring and revealing that came from those works, slowing the viewer down to engage with the subject, is something that I am always trying to do, both in the film and in the sculpture.

There is a real tranquillity in the film and I think that is the most important element of what divides your work from direct medical research – that stopping, slowing down and making people take time to look.

It is quite clear that people involved in medical research do not have the luxury to take the time that I have, so I see it as an important role, going into these situations and asking questions which they aren't able to, opening up that space for reflection which they don't have on a day-to-day basis. I used to feel that I didn't know enough and was shy about asking uninformed questions, but I now see real value in it as it is becoming clear that people in those situations have themselves gained something from the work that I do. I don't want to be the person investigating the value in the work that they do: I would rather start a process of positive questioning.

It is clear to see the kinds of questions you have raised in relation to medical education which could then have a hugely positive knock-on

effect somewhere down the line. Can you give any examples of the more recent kinds of questions you have raised within the medical establishment which might incite change in a similar kind of way?

In relation to *Cast from Nature*, I have had a number of discussions with anatomists at Glasgow University who realised that they always dissect bodies in the same position, so they constantly see the anatomical structures in the same way. But they are now considering what would happen if that could be changed, even in a small way. So it is possible to open up different ways of looking and seeing. Traditions can get entrenched so quickly and if no one questions them they can really narrow possibilities for seeing things anew. Along with this exhibition at GSS it was important to organise a programme of talks and events and include the voices of people from medicine and science who have informed what I am doing, to come and share their experiences with the audience.

I was just thinking back to your work *Phantom Twins*, 1997, and wondering what role the Gothic still played in your work. In *Cast from Nature* there is this grimace on the man's face which is very unsettling.

I am drawn to the Gothic; maybe it helps stop the work being too cold or clinical. I have made quite a number of works that reference Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, so I do indulge occasionally.

I suppose you don't want it to become gratuitous.

No, but making artwork allows the freedom to indulge or pull back as I choose. What makes me feel OK about *Cast from Nature* is the fact that the more Gothic element was already there. When we looked together at the cast I showed you how the wooden false teeth had probably been inserted under the gum to rebuild the structure of a sinking face, creating this grimace. I am revealing it, but I am not actually creating it – these rules I set for myself control how far I can go with this type of imagery.

So why do you keep returning so often to the Victorian, or Post-Enlightenment period of medical education, as you have done with this current project?

I do keep going back to that era for many reasons. Discoveries were so urgent and exciting at that time, scientists were steamrolling forward and the discoveries made paved the way for the future of medicine, but they set aside or ignored ethical concerns for the 'greater good'. ■

Christine Borland is at Camden Arts Centre, London to July 10. She has recently received a Vital Spark award from Creative Scotland to work alongside medical partners with US artist Brody Condon to make new work exploring performative aspects of medicine.

ROSIE LESSO is an artist and writer based in Scotland.

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