Lucy Cox
Interviews Lesley Bunch

LC: Hello, Lesley! Congratulations on winning the Contemporary British Painting Prize a couple of years ago. I understand that you were one the selectors for last year's prize [2023]. Could you tell me more about the selection process?

LB: Hi Lucy and thank you. Being on the selection panel for the prize in 2023 was an enormous privilege and a challenge. The quality of the submissions was so high, to limit the list to 15 seemed impossible. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to look at the range of painting from across the UK, to see what is driving painters, and the depth of enquiry out there.

LC: Some of my favourite paintings of yours are the *Shadow Sculpture* series. Numbers *12*, *6* and *9* won the prize. Could you elaborate on the origins of this series?

LB: I can trace the origins, in part, back to my degree show at Goldsmiths' in the early 90s. The internet was in its infancy, and I became a little obsessed by ideas about 'cyberspace' and 'virtual reality'.

Although I had been admitted on the course as a painter, I soon turned to other mediums. For my degree show I designed imaginary objects with no discernable function using Cadkey. I subjected these 'potential' objects to multiple manufacturing tests using Moldflow's new software that identified potential flaws in process and mould design for injection moulded plastic parts. I measured the effects of injection gate location, cooling rates, and alternative types of plastic. These tests resulted in a huge amount of diagnostic information about something that didn't, and would never exist.

I represented these imaginary objects with photograms, using diverse found material. I then overlaid the photograms with the diagnostic information, using the computer language of the time, which I had photo-silkscreened on layers of glass. I used UV sensitive ink, and under black light the installation resembled a series of glowing holograms. Each of the 20 in the series took the form of jarring information-overdose.

Ultimately, the object portrayed, and the diagnostic information didn't point to anything that existed in reality. It was presented as fact, but remained fiction.

LC: When did your interest in the relationship between digital technology and painting first emerge?

LB: In the years after university, I developed the ideas further in different mediums. Increasingly I had the benefit of hindsight as to how the internet had actually changed our lives as we became bombarded with a proliferation of digital images on screens, the new visual language of our global mass consumer culture.

During a year's residency at Wimbledon College of Arts I started experimenting with digital photography, learned the basics of Photoshop, and returned to the darkroom with digitally printed transparencies.

I had applied for the residency with a proposal to explore our relationship with invested objects and our propensity to collect, label, organise and objectify as a means to draw boundaries in our lives, and create a sense of self. While there I put a call out, asking others to lend me their invested objects, and to talk to me about the emotions, memory and etc. they invested in that object. The object between us became a catalyst for a release of memories that had been pivotal moments in the lender's life. Throughout each interview I was mindful that I interpreted the lender's experience through my own.

I borrowed each object for a few weeks, and created shadows with it. I captured the shadow composition in a photograph that, for me, represented the essence of the lender's story. Taken separately, I viewed each shadow as a manifestation, or 'remains' of, my exchange with the lender. Placed together, and presented in the guise of logographs, these 'remains' took on the form of language. My *Shadow Language* series of photographs resulted; designed to be dependent on context, reflecting the plurality of experience, with an effacement of the agent. The focus wasn't on something signified by language, but on the infinite meaning-generating potentiality of language through its focusing on itself and ever-renewing itself.

However I returned to the lender's stories. The photos of shadows didn't capture their emotional intensity; for this they seemed flat, too static. I decided to progress the project through the process of painting.

LC: Have you always been interested in photography? I am very interested to hear how you use the medium as a starting point for your paintings.

LB: Yes, absolutely. As well as 'taking' photos that rely on a click of the shutter, I am interested in what can happen in the darkroom, the process of exposure, developing, fixing, the negotiation

with chance. Through Photoshop I feel I am ‘stepping into’ a photo. I zoom in and manipulate it right down to the single pixel.

What interested me in using a photograph as a starting point for my Shadow Sculpture Series was that it captured a moment in time; a composed, fleeting event. I view each photo as an initial sketch, in this case capturing the moment the shadow is manipulated to convey the essence of a lender’s story.

We have a propensity to read a photograph as evidence, or fact. Although it is a mechanical record at a particular moment in time, that record is composed; by frame, aperture and exposure, it’s point of view contrived. When I start to paint, I refer to the photograph. The first layer is quite representative of it. Then the painting takes over. It takes on a life of its own. My aim is to present the shadow as convincingly as I can as an actual object. To do this, some things become exaggerated, and others are left out. Some colour is heightened. Components react to each other, and colour is reflected from one element to the next. My memory of how I perceive light, in discerning an object’s position in 3D space, plays a part in exaggerating elements as I paint. While painting, the lender’s story remains in my mind.

My process requires time. This is evident in the multitude of layers, built up slowly. Through Photoshop you can ‘add’ layers. However these manifest themselves flatly, in 2D, in the individual pixel. This isn’t the case with a painting. Layers sit under layers. With the use of transparent oil, light bounces back through subsequent layers. For the viewer, colour is mixed optically.

A passage of time manifests itself in each painting in many ways; the lender’s re-experiencing re-editing and recounting their memories, my systemised and ritualised approach to making the work, the many-layered application of paint, and my developing thoughts about the lender’s story as I paint. Of course memory isn’t static, we edit it with subsequent experience. Cognitive scientists have theorised that we construct our memories anew each time we remember. Psychologists have investigated how we record our experiences. This is not the way a camera records them, as our memories work differently. We extract key elements, label, encode and store them. We imaginatively recreate our experiences rather than retrieve copies of them. In the process of reconstructing we add subsequent experience, knowledge or emotion gained after the experience. The passage of time is important in relation to autobiographical memories. We perceive our sense of self as unfolding through time.

Our relationship to invested objects is not static. When we re-encounter them, they can be agents of change. The emotion they trigger may affect a decision or influence how we act upon

subsequent events. In the end, I think of the paintings as new serial objects, with no final term. They cannot be categorised, classified, or 'owned' as no label can be attached. The series is a collection of the uncollectable; shadows, a sense of self, the other.

LC: Did you have a selection process in mind for the borrowed objects, or was it completely random? I remember seeing you at Wimbledon College of Arts all those years ago! For those who don't know, I studied fine art painting at Wimbledon College of Arts from 2013 to 2015.

LB: I have fond memories of meeting and talking about painting with you! The B.A. painting department, led at that time by Dereck Harris, was such a vibrant welcoming place, and celebrated diverse approaches to painting.

Some lenders were friends, and some were strangers. I was especially drawn to coloured and transparent objects that threw shadows full of colour. Although I call them Shadow Sculpture, they reference reflection, refraction, diffusion, and etc; the way light encounters, moves around, and/or through an object.

LC: You hold a master's degree in archaeology focusing on Japanese art of the Edo Period. What drew you to this subject? Has it influenced your practice?

LB: Prior to university I lived in Tokyo for about three years. One of my jobs there was teaching English to a copywriting firm. It was then that I first became fascinated with Japanese language and culture.

Japanese language is contextual, depending on the age, social status, gender of the speaker, and the relationship between the speaker and listener. Each written kanji has various meanings and pronunciations, which are activated depending on its placement in a group of other kanji. Many aspects of Japanese culture were, and remain, fascinating to me. There are no street names. When someone gives directions, they are drawn. In Japan, no one has one 'true' personality, instead many. Personality changes depending on whom you are with. Even the act of food preparation, display and eating is interesting; chopsticks are used so that food is transferred, not cut, but picked up. Gesture, emotion in the eye, and body position communicate as much as words. Japanese culture prioritises community, not the individual; there is no concept of guilt, instead there is shame. The list goes on.

Many things I studied for my MA at S.O.A.S. still resonate, and have inspired my practice. While there I concentrated on Ukiyoe, the art of the Floating World, and the pictorial device

frequently employed in it, mitate. Perhaps a more direct source of inspiration for my current series is Edo period writing and poetry, and Zen riddles.

The title *Cut Two Pieces in Three* for one of my recent solo shows was derived from a koan, a riddle from Zen practice which is posited to transcend limitations of dualistic thinking, logical reasoning and language. Although haiku seem quite specific, they do not point to one particular meaning or reading. Roland Barthes said it well: "Deciphering, normalizing, or tautological, the ways of interpretation, intended in the West to pierce meaning, ...cannot help failing the haiku; for the work of reading which is attached to it is to suspend language, not to provoke it…"

Overall my paintings are a visual language resisting verbal interpretation. My Shadow Sculpture paintings, although painted with meticulous detail, remain ambiguous and unanchored to literal meaning. They question our propensity to label, categorise and objectify. The lender's story remains in confidence; the object casting the shadow never revealed, its label not important. They sit somewhere between the figurative and abstract, reality and illusion, volume and flatness, absence and presence.

Basho said it beautifully:

How admirable he is
Who does not think 'Life is ephemeral'
When he sees a flash of lightning!

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