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Matt's Gallery Q4

Q is a series of interviews, conducted to coincide with the programme

Annie Whiles interviewed by Tim Dixon

Tim Dixon: We've talked before about the 'Wow! Signal', which seems to lead into a lot of the different themes within your work for Matt's Gallery and your practice more widely. So perhaps we could start by talking about what it is and why it holds such a fascination for you.

Annie Whiles: When you're making a work, there often comes a point where you wonder if what you're thinking about has already happened. I came across the 'Wow! Signal' in that way. It's just a momentary, unexplained spike in a radio graph; a possibility of a signal from another place. It was a scientific report, but I liked the title and I liked the name of the apparatus involved: the Big Ear (a radio telescope at Ohio State University). I like the way that science attributes its design or engineering to nature, with all that equipment already being there, but recreated in some way.

And it got the name because an astronomer [Jerry R Ehman] wrote 'Wow!' on the readout, next to the data.

Exactly, on something that's really rational, measured, mathematical, scientific, there's this notation, handwritten.

That seems to run through your work: things crossing over between science and myth, museology, religion, and the esoteric. It would be interesting to hear about those different ways of explaining, exploring and understanding the world. They seem, in your work, to both cross over and contradict.

I go at things like I'm just grazing on all sorts of information. Very often I think that research is not so much a process of following a particular interest, but of looking for something and grabbing what you need. You're making your own mythology out of things that were probably made up anyway. I'm especially interested in the kind of historical origins of objects; how they're photographed and what kind of relationship you might have with an image of an object that might not exist anymore. When I graze, I think I'm very subjective about what I find, which often ends up in me misreading things and finding what I want out of something.

Around your studio you've got lots of postcards of museum artefacts, and there's a particular photographic language in the way they're portrayed. There's a mystery about the original intent which is then put into a framework – the enlightenment ideal of trying to catalogue the world and the anthropological project that goes along with that. Those objects become a signifier for something that manages to push beyond that as well.

I think as I've got older I'm more interested in the depth of my confusion, as opposed to having a logical explanation for something. That feels like someone else's job! Some information you just digest, but often you reach a point with something where it just doesn't move aside. Art is the only thing that can make an argument for that sort of obstructed encounter with information or history. People in other fields might argue, but I think that's what art can do.

You've talked about the way you keep things and images for a long time, and when something clicks, or you connect it with something else, you're able to follow that channel and work with it. Do you want to keep that source material hidden, or are you happy for people to see it?

I think in collecting images and reaching moments where they come to fruition in some way, there's a moment to edit or move them around, or make groups or comparisons with them. In a publication accompanying *The Gaper*, I document making that sculpture, and all the images that orbited it during the process, that I either thought about or that made me laugh in relation to it, or that I hope that the object might have thought about or dealt with as I was interacting with it over two years. It's also a really necessary distraction or refresher, during the time of making.

Your work is so labour-intensive, and you're often working on a piece over months or years. I wanted to ask about the amount of time you spend with a piece, and how important that time is to your practice. Let's say you're working on a piece for two years, and while you're working on it there's all these other images you might come across and shifts in your thinking. How do you feel that manifests in the work? Does your thinking change as you're making something?

When I make a piece, there's a commitment to what I've started, for instance with scale, and I've got to go through with it. But just cutting an image out and placing it in the studio allows for these different temporalities: those images can change my thinking very quickly, whereas the actual process of making changes so slowly. It's not that I see some sort of virtue in taking a long time with something, it just does! Sometimes it's really annoying but it's just got to be wood — that's the criteria that I've set and I'm the idiot that's got to do it!

You've likened your process to archaeology – a process of uncovering when working with wood. Do you feel like you kind of predetermine what you're going to do or is there a degree of following where the material leads you?

Not really the latter. I work from an image and I just keep looking at it; almost to sort of burn it onto my retina. It's an archaeology, in my romanticised view of the discipline, in the sense that you're digging or carving, and you've got to pester an area in order to get to the surface you want. You also come across things you definitely don't want it to be, so often it's a process of eliminating the wrong shapes until you get it how you want it. It's a bit like how I describe research.

You've talked about wanting to paint the surface so you're not romanticising the grain of the wood, for instance. I feel like some of the presence of the wood is there, in your work, but do you make a conscious decision to avoid that?

Well, I love medieval painted wood carvings. They used to be done by two different people: the carving would be the donkey work, almost, and the painting would be the artist creating an illusion on top. That relationship to painting my work, as in the woodwork, is partially to stop its material identity being just wood, because there's so much more that I want from the work. It's about getting that feeling of the image, if you like. So with *Blackheath Donkey* (2011) I saw something across a

field and then went back, took a photograph of what I thought I saw, then made a drawing, then an embroidery, and then the work. That image became really key.

How do you see the relationship between those three steps? Do you always work in that sort of way, translating an image across different media?

Yes, and to re-stage something that I've come across. It relates, I think, to what an icon is. It sounds really pompous to call it that, but it's an image that goes into some sort of mechanical repetition of print; an image that matters, that has to be explored over and over again.

You mentioned an interest in things like icons and church wood carvings, and some of the themes you deal with, – Saint Cupertino, the Gaper, levitation, and those kind of stories around science and miracles – things that escape rational explanation. Do you see the process and the craft as being linked to that history?

When I went to the Frederic Mares Museum in Barcelona, there was a whole wall of crucifixions from the fourth century right through to the nineteenth. All different levels of sophistication; all different sizes. It was like every hundred years someone had tried to repaint this thing, all the cloth fell the same way: like a kind of Chinese whispers of what this icon should look like. Then, returning to big ears, there was one in the middle which just had these massive ears, and I thought about that person making those ears; that he'd probably been commissioned and it was something that he had to get right in that scheme of representation and imagery, and I was really moved by that. He probably just got the piss ripped out of him for making Jesus with massive ears. But I also found myself really moved and transported by the material. I find that a lot with wood, because it was alive, and it's still moving, and I think of the amount of people that have handled it or the rooms it's been in, or temperatures it's felt. When I left college – this is returning to making things up I thought I'd found a word for 'very human', and I had it printed on the back of my BA postcard. It was 'frangible'. Someone told me it meant good pastry. But at the time it was the right word. For me wood feels like the nearest-to-human material.

I wanted to ask you a little about the role of scale in your work. You often work at a 1:1, life-size scale. With this piece for Matt's, you've altered the scale away from a naturalistic one. Why did you make that decision for this piece and how does it feel next to your other works?

It feels right for this piece. A while back I made work that had this sort of practical application. Like you could wear a yoke with two seats on for your angels, or you could wear a hat where the top part levitated, or levitation shoes for Cupertino, and it was all wood, and it was all incumbent and ridiculous. But with this work, there's something about the stand and the object that sort of liberates it from having to be the size of a real person. Knowing that it was going into that space, I made it so that it would negotiate the space for the viewer. I want it to work for the viewer; to listen for the people going in. With the work I make, especially if they're animals, or *The Gaper*, I like the idea that they're already preoccupied, and that you have to kind of work out what your role is.

What do you mean about the work being 'preoccupied'? Do you mean that they're engrossed in some activity that the viewer might not be privy to? I feel that with *The Gaper*, he's standing up and looking, like something's caught his attention.

Yeah, he's getting on with his internal world in an external space, in his pants, and I think that dynamic is really important about how for me personally I negotiate art spaces. I think it can't take itself too seriously but it's also a bit about saying: 'this is not about you'. Because I think that very often people have an expectancy to decode a work and go away feeling cleverer than they did when they went in. And I think that's a problem. Especially if I'm willing to be confused! I think there's an exchange there, that I'm trying to form.

Not fully allowing the viewer in somehow or not having everything there to be viewed or comprehended immediately. I certainly feel that with the *Moondogs* (2018). There's something so intentional and deliberate about those works, but at the same time, it's not clear what that intention is, why it's been done that way, or what that might signify. So you're left feeling there's a purposefulness, but you're maybe not fully allowed to know what that purpose is.

You say allowed and I say available. Hundreds and hundreds of decisions go into making a work, down to the shape of an eye. I go over and over and over something again until I've got what I want. There's some things that you think would form a really easy exchange or bridge about something that's already in the world. I don't want anyone to worry about what sculpture is, but I do want them to worry about what it's doing. I've got no intention of making anyone feel left out of what's going on — in fact, I'm championing that I want people to feel comfortable enough to just perceive something and not have it explained away. Or like with the dogs, who, at that particular height they're placed at, can't be petted. You can't treat something as you normally would. You can't own it, in a way.

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