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 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 working on is 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). It was thought of as something that could designengineering 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 graph.

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 thinking, exploring and understanding the world. They seem, in your work, to both cross over and contradict.

I go at things like I’m just grasping 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 getting the knowledge that you need. You’re looking for something 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 was thinking about the ears in the work that I’ve been making recently, I’ve often end up in me misunderstanding 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 origins of a ticket which is then put into this framework of the enlightenment idea of trying to catalogue the whole of 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 receiving 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 this sort of obscured manner 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 from your work, or are you hoping to be inspired by seeing 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 decision, because you’re not really working with objects when you are. I needed to think about thought or that made me laugh in relation to it, or that I hope that the objects 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, and I wanted to talk about the scale of the work. Of one piece, you might have the idea of an eye pouring with blood, 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 set and I’m the idiot that’s going to make it! It’s not about me.

You’ve been connected 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 archeological view, I think 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 isn’t 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, rather than just 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 said you allow and I say available. Hundreds and hundreds of decisions go into making a work, down to the shape of an eye. I see over and over and over and 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 don’t like leaving it or 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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M o o n d o g s

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