

'Spilling the T'

The format for this piece of writing is a television interview on a chat show. I play both interviewer and interviewee. This structure is important as I'm interested in the increasingly obsolete nature of TV and the surreal interior design of chat show sets. So much time, money and planning goes into these productions and yet they seek to appear as a living room chat amongst friends. Also the fact that people are paid to appear on chat shows highlights the fakeness of the 'friendly chat'. I find this paradox interesting and it's something I feel I may want to play with more in my physical artwork. The redundancy of TV is probably due to the ease and convenience of the internet but the temporary versus permanent structures of television set design interests me. The other idea surrounding the set design is the way our view is controlled. We only see the camera angles the producers want us to see- the rigging and cameras and equipment are all out of sight creating a space devoid of social contexts or labels. I chose to play both interviewer and interviewee as it provides me with an opportunity to dress up and inhabit different personas whilst still being myself. We all alter ourselves slightly depending on who we are with. We may do this subconsciously but the point is that we have such depth to our personalities that certain traits are more pronounced and coaxed out of us by different surroundings and situations.



Tess:

So Tess, you're in the process of making an installation for an upcoming exhibition and you've got a 50s diner set and a seated mannequin which will be edited to look like you and will sit at the table. Everything on the in the installation will represent famous artworks. So you're going to be reducing these grandiose masterpieces down to everyday objects in order to examine and expose the consumerism that exists in the artworld.

TESS:

In a way yes, I'm definitely examining it but it's positive too, she's living, breathing, eating, wearing art- which is how I feel about myself. As with most of my work this piece is going to be much more celebratory. The art world exists and operates in the real world as much as the wonderland of make pretend. The art market is subject to rules and preconceptions of business and currency and it seems silly to hide from that.

Tess:

How did you go about choosing these artists, there's certainly some I think you could have added to show a broader view of the artworld? Why didn't you focus solely on artists that highlight consumerism?

TESS:

I chose people that have developed my picture of what the artworld is, people I've grown up respecting and learning from. I don't want to comment on the artworld on behalf of all of society, it's more personal than that. I've chosen people I admire and love which is why these are more homages than critiques. It's more true to life in that respect, things aren't usually black and white, with goodies and baddies.

Tess:

How do you plan to edit the mannequin to look like you, isn't the face and body shape completely different?

TESS:

I don't think that matters, it's really more symbolic. She'll have pink hair which will immediately link her to me but it will also be a reference to the art of drag. I plan to airbrush her my skin tone and paint details like my black eyeliner and eye colour to help her become me. The body shape doesn't matter either since she'll be in quite baggy, tactile clothing. She's really a caricature of me, caricatures often convey the essence of someone better than a anatomically accurate portrayal.

Tess:

So you aren't only commenting on the art world, you're talking about culture in general if you're referencing drag?

TESS:

Well I'm predominantly looking at the artworld and the consumerism attached to it via a Judy Chicago-style table setting. I'm using people that have shaped my view of art and drag has undeniably moulded my ideas around art, and society in general. I completely believe that drag is an art form and a really powerful one that has often been looked down on in the same way craft has been. Drag is also a part of art history, probably the most famous being Man Ray's photographs of Duchamp as Rose Selavy.



Tess:

Are you aiming for a polished result or more naive and handcrafted?

TESS:

I really don't know yet, I want there to be coherence throughout the installation but the hodgepodge feel of the bits and bobs needs to remain, like a carefully curated jumble sale! It's a curated, composed, three dimensional painting, I want it to be striking and aesthetically pleasing, whether that comes from polished,

professional objects remains to be seen. Each artwork alters the surrounding pieces so seeing them all together is the only way to compose this installation.

Tess:

Didn't Clement Greenberg say that "...all profoundly original art looks ugly at first."¹ doesn't that take away from or even condemn your artwork to failure?

TESS:

No, I don't think so at all, I think if all an artwork has to offer is visual gratification, then yes, it may have failed. In the Reith Lectures Grayson Perry said something along the lines of decoration is a dirty, or an insulting word.² Inherent and incidental beauty has been shunned, an idea propelled by Greenberg and the pretentious clique-y parts of the art world. I enjoy *looking* at nice things, I enjoy *making* nice things, and that doesn't have to take away from their integrity. Nice should be given more respect, I like the feeling it gives in an increasingly ugly world. I agree with lots of what Greenberg said, or at least it's intriguing to debate, his thoughts on the disinterested eye³, for example. I don't necessarily agree with it but it's an interesting and sometimes useful way to approach art.

Tess:

What if people don't get your references, will your work have failed?

TESS:

There's going to be such a saturation and palimpsest of references that most viewers are bound to recognise something- if not from an art context then from a cultural standpoint. A good example of the varying levels of accessibility is the napkin. I've taken a red and white spotty handkerchief and embroidered it very delicately. The red spots reference Yayoi Kusama who most people within the art world would recognise. The embroidery is a shape taken from a painting in Helen Chadwick's viral landscapes series. Even people that love Chadwick's work would not necessarily spot (excuse the pun) this homage, but that's ok. The hidden layers are as important as the immediately visible ones as they give the work a depth and a gravity. It would be nice for a viewer to be able to look at my work and look again and see something they hadn't noticed before.

Tess:

¹ Greenberg, Clement, *The Nation*, (Emeritus Victor Navasky 1945)

² Perry, Grayson, *Reith Lectures* (BBC Radio 4 2013)

³ Jones, Caroline, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (University of Chicago Press 2016)

Is there any correlation between the artists, Chadwick and Kusama for example, in the pieces in which you reference more than one artist?

TESS:

They are linked in the way that all the artists I have included are linked- they all shaped my knowledge and understanding of art from my childhood. The artists chosen to sit together in single artworks aren't necessarily related, the references are determined more by the object I am aiming to depict and allowing that to define which artist (or artists) would best illustrate that.

Tess:

Have the objects undertaken journeys of development or was it pretty immediate that you knew which references would match which object?

TESS:

Some objects were straight forward like the Hirst vase inspired by Mother and Child Divided, but others went back and forth between artist and reference. The salt and pepper shakers were originally meant to be in response to Duchamp and Blake, Sgt. Pepper and people being salty towards the fountain. I couldn't find the square shakers I wanted but found ones whose curves lent themselves to Duchamp's fountain really well. I wanted to reference Pip and Pop in the form of a swirling rainbow salt pattern cascading out of one shaker. Since I didn't have the square surface to put the Blake design on to I ended up painting it in the style of Pip and Pop. It was really a blessing in disguise because I couldn't have sold the salt spillage and I really want everything to have a price tag attached. My ideas of costing have evolved too, I'm thinking of adding a contemporary political spin by having the cost of the objects match that of my degree.



Tess:

This piece looks at consumerism, who were the most important artists for you to reference in that respect?

TESS:

I think Pipilotti Rist is a big one- not because of her work but because of a quote which really eloquently talks about the art world. “I am also opposed to art being elitist and I don’t see why it shouldn’t be commercial. It’s absurd. Even if the artworld keeps denying it, the art market exists and functions according to the same laws as any other business...”⁴ I think she’s absolutely right, that’s the way it is so we should embrace it. Damien Hirst is someone I’ve referenced and someone who makes the art market work for him. He’s an easy scapegoat for commercialisation but what overshadows that, for me, is his compulsion to create. He seems to do what he does because he loves it, the money is almost a by product.

The other reference that is important here is Takashi Murakami. He included a Louis Vuitton shop in his exhibition and I’ve referenced him through a knockoff purse from their collaboration which I’ve filled with edible money. He’s just such a perfect example of positivity, rather than shy away from the consumerism that clings to art he’s taken it and made it part of his art.

⁴ Phelan, Peggy; Obrist, Hans-Ulrich; Bronfen, Elisabeth, Pipilotti Rist (Published London: Phaidon, 2001)

Tess:

Did you consider using product placement or other tools to illustrate consumerism in modern culture?

TESS:

I wanted to reference consumerism in different ways and I don't think I needed to use objects other than artworks. The art world is a concentrated version of the wider world, art looks at all aspects of life, for example, Hirst makes you think about consumerism in relation to personal wealth, whilst Warhol is talking about popular culture and consumerism as a subject, a muse even. There is a subtle product placement in the 'Bass' menu holder. Bass beer is depicted in lots of paintings, perhaps most notably, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* by Manet. I was thinking, it's almost reminiscent of a Coke advert- which is, as a multibillion dollar company, a huge symbol of consumerism.

Tess:

Why are you exhibiting all these components as one art work rather than individually? Your work has been described as busy and maximalist to the point of it becoming unreadable, are you worried you'll fall into that trap again.

TESS:

Individually they don't comment on much, I do think that a lot of the pieces could go on to become the beginnings of projects and I keep having to reign myself in from developing any one part too far. I want to convey the vastness of the artworld- the busyness and the variety but I also want to give the objects space to breathe and have their own individual impacts and conversations. That's why I'm creating this as one object rather than making lots of artworks and *curating* them together.

Tess:

There seems, to me, to be something of the pregnant moment happening here, the way her hand reaches out to her phone and this stillness and highly composed look of the piece, it's almost like stepping into an painting.

TESS:

Yes, I thought that too, the scene is unrealistic because too much is going on at once in order to convey lots of messages and, ultimately, to tell a story. I have thought of this piece as a painting because, as you say, the way it's composed is very painterly, and that was a conscious decision.

Tess:

Are there any gender issues in this piece, being a woman artist in this time and referencing art history?

TESS:

In some ways it's a subtly feminist artwork in that she meets your gaze. She is not an odalisque or reclining nude looking away and accepting her position as an object, even though that's exactly what she is. The male gaze⁵ sees women looking away and contorting themselves for maximum viewing pleasure. These academic painting tools really interest me, I'm toying with the idea of giving her a handheld mirror and having her ignore it, daring the viewer to call her a vanitas. Berger put it better than I can, "You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting "Vanity," thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure."⁶

I thought it was important to include Jann Haworth as she was the other artist behind the Beatles' famous Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band album cover. Her husband, Peter Blake got most of the credit for the work, probably simply because he's a man. I mean that's not to say he's not talented, I love Blake's work, I just think Haworth deserves more recognition.

The shoes also talk about gender to some degree, high heels are a cultural object, symbolic of femininity and sometimes seen as a male designed constriction on women. The fact that they're splattered with paint referenced the misogynistic, chauvinistic Pollock, almost like I'm stomping on him and his outdated views. Again, this is all completely open to interpretation and I love that other people will take something from my work that I hadn't intended, that isn't a failing, it's progression.

Tess:

Another technique you've used is the pregnant moment, was that intentional?

TESS:

It was unintentional to start with but when I recognised it I worked with it more to amplify it. I like the idea of modernising something so traditional and recognisable in such an esoteric way.

Tess:

⁵ Mulvey, Laura, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (GRIN Publishing 2008)

⁶ Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin books 1972)

Did you consider making the installation on a smaller scale as a sculpture, that would have been easier perhaps?

TESS:

It may have been easier for some parts but it would have lost its authenticity and connection to the viewer. People encountering the scene can interact with it and sit at the table. They look at the figure and they see part of themselves, if she were smaller she'd be an art object. She looks directly ahead accepting the gaze of the viewer and refuses to become an object. The scene is uncannily close to a real world situation but with the volume and saturation turned up, it's recognisable and accessible but slightly alien.

Tess:

Why do you want people to be able to enter the artwork, isn't that contradictory to the difficulty in 'getting in to the artworld'?

TESS:

No I don't think so, 10 years ago, maybe, but now anyone can be an artist. The internet has become prolific, it's so easy to curate your own feed or sell your art online. It's actually really easy to do this and it's not to do with artistic talent, it's to do with playing the game. You can even buy followers now, or buy friends, digital prostitution!