

Claudia Zeiske, Deveron Arts in conversation with David Blyth, 2006

Claudia says:

*Hi David, are you there?*

David says:

*Yes Claudia, here and present.*

Claudia says:

*Good. I wanted to ask you some questions today. Tell me a bit about yourself first. After moving from Aberdeen what is it like living and working at Knockespoch?*

David says:

*Well, moving from an urban environment to a rural settlement like the Knockespoch Estate has been a great experience for me, for my work and for my family. One of the most noticeable changes has been the quietness and the abundance of livestock and agriculture that now exists on my back door step. The baying of animals at night is a far cry from the brawling weekends we've been used to.*

Claudia says:

*Why is that so important, what is your relationship to animals?*

*Actually, maybe I should better ask about the relationship to animals and the land, how would you describe that?*

David says:

*As you know, my work has concerned itself for some time with Man's relationship with the Animal. This interest has normally revolved around the notion of the 'wild' and how animals might provide a conduit, as living sentient beings, for understanding the natural world around us. Latterly, this has developed to encompass farm animals which is, I believe, due to a greater shared experience between contemporary man and the domesticated animal.*

Claudia says:

*Where does the spiritual come in? Do you think by making animals into objects they gain magic of some description?*

David says:

*No, its not like that at all; the magic is already in the material. Incorporating animal detritus into the making of 'objects' may visually suggest ideas of fetishism, totemism or animism but I'm just trying to isolate certain properties that are common to man and animal alike. One only has to glance at Inuit and native North Americans cultures to learn that such natural materials are inherent with 'magical' properties. The notion of sympathetic hunting magic, for instance, allows the hunter a particular power over his prey. Like attracts like, so they say, which is why their weapons commonly incorporate animal parts or carvings of the creatures they hope to catch.*

Claudia says:

*With the Knockturne project you address aspects of life beyond terrestrial boundaries. Tell us a bit how you came across Valentina Tereshkova.*

David says:

*My interest with Valentina Tereskova, the first woman in space, initially stems from a drawing entitled 'Girl Astronaut' by German artist, Joseph Beuys. The drawing alludes to the notion of the sorceress and her ability to traverse between different planes of existence. It was only a small step onwards to discover who the first woman in Space actually was...and because she was of Russian background*

made her all the more interesting for me. Valentina was a pioneer in her field but the understanding that she experienced some kind of altered mental state during the Vostok 6 space mission would alert my attention. There are many aspects about her that were particularly resonant for me. Valentina was of peasant background, working on farms throughout her youth until she became a textile mill worker involved with the transformation of animal fibres into fibres worn by humans. It was her interest in parachuting that ultimately led to her becoming a cosmonaut. When she landed back on Earth she was cared for by shepherds and land workers before officials could reach her. To this day, she remains the only woman to have traveled in Space unaccompanied.

Claudia says:

Luna and the Arts go back a long way. The moon is a kind of chaperone of romance and unspoken feelings. There is a thought that for man landing on the moon, something interesting would occur in the human psyche, that landing on the moon would be an act of destruction.

David says:

The complex influence of the Moon has been well documented by most cultures throughout mythology, in literature, music, poetry and performance. Its relation to water, seasonal changes, fertility and vegetal growth makes her a vital character throughout the history of man. Certainly, the 1960's space race with the modern lunar landing had resounding esoteric implications on all aspects of our self perception in universal terms, including human achievement on scientific, moral and environmental levels. Going back momentarily to Valentina Tereshkova...although she did not land on the moon, there is a resonance in fact that she fell pregnant shortly after her flight - perhaps illustrating the (pro)creative aspect of Earth's only satellite. Her husband was also a Russian cosmonaut and, consequently, her baby was subject to scientific investigation due to the assumption that some transformation of the human make-up may have taken place. Of course, the change was on evident in her but in us, the evolutionary zeitgeist of the times. In recent weeks, it has emerged that NASA now intends to build a space station on the surface of the moon. Although this is not a new concept the reality of such a venture, in our lifetime, certainly poses some interesting questions about the potential future of the human race. While the subject of sex in space remains a somewhat urban myth, the paramount reason for sending a woman into space in the first instance was to learn whether the continuation of human life in Space was feasible. Although Valentina Tereshkova's flight was a triumph for communist ideals her achievements would also help to destroy the notion of a 'weaker sex', proving that women perform just as adequately as men. In the build up to the Knockturne exhibition, my partner and I actually bought a plot of land on the moon - at a very reasonable price, I might add. Perhaps we might visit one day...

Claudia says:

Interesting. There is a thought whether the space age, and the moon landings in particular are exposing our own moral absolutes into some local customs of another place. Do you have any plans to move there next? During the run-up to Knockturne you have proven that the continuation of your own family is very feasible. Is that something that would tempt you if you could?

David says:

I have always maintained that I am an Earth child! However, the thought of moving to the moon has become rather attractive lately. Before giving it too much thought, the plot of land we bought was always intended as some kind of rendezvous point, either in dreamtime or

posthumously, even. Although our lunar deeds wouldn't stand up in court, there is something very tangible these days about the ownership of land on the Moon especially when looking through the telescope. Yet, the reality of actually moving there in our lifetime is another issue altogether. For me, the notion of a lunar croft would be a highly desirable lifestyle combining space age technology and that of basic rural subsistence. The mental image of a ploughman thinking about life on the moon pretty much sums it up for me. I think the idea of the Space Age has been with us for a long, long time now and has filtered all the way through to our most basic understanding of our place in the Universe, and the future of mankind. In becoming progressively 'science fact', we have developed sophisticated technologies in order to expand our boundaries of extra-terrestrial travel and, in doing so, are transformed by the new customs we create for ourselves that allow these expansions to emerge. Mankind has embraced the idea of Space and pictures himself to be there one day. Space is the Place, after all.

Claudia says:

Now, lets move on to something else. Tell me, to what extend did the imminence of the birth of your son, Robin influence this project?

David says:

The conception of Robin is a strange and wonderful thing to happen to my partner and I. The fact that he came at this time is something I'll never quite understand. It is poignant that his arrival would coincide with my current research into the Moon, my interest in Valentina Tereshkova and the birth of her own Moonchild. Having children is something I have always wanted but has never seemed to happen. It's taken us nine years of carelessness! With the knowledge of Robin's imminent birth, I took it upon myself to gain some first hand experience with pregnancy and birth so I paid a visit to a local shepherd who allowed me to assist him during the lambing period.

Claudia says:

What came first, the idea of going to the shepherd, or the knowledge about the pregnancy?

David says:

You know this, I don't really know. Last year I found an adorable dead lamb in a field that I preserved and from that point it became important for me to save as many lambs as I could. I always intended to visit the sheep farm so when the knowledge of our pregnancy came about, it was something that took on a new significance for me. The birth of my own child and the birth of this year's lambs became linked in some way. Perhaps I had to save these lambs to ensure the safe delivery of my own? Who knows, it's bit of a mystery to me.

Claudia says:

Interesting you call it 'our' pregnancy. What does Sara think about all this?

David says:

Well, you'd have to ask her yourself but I understand it to be the most beautiful thing to happen in our long relationship together. In fact, I don't think I have known her to be so consistently happy until now. Our pregnancy is something that we shared together, albeit in different ways, but still...I think there is something very tender about two people watching and waiting for their child to be born. The combining of love and spirit with the joy of new life is something fascinating to share with someone you care for very greatly.

Claudia says:

Yes, I noticed her being happy very much too. For anybody who has experienced it, making a child is the best thing one ever, ever can

*make. Do you feel in any way different from this experience from a woman. I mean do you feel totally part in the making, like in the making of your art work, or is there any jealousy or even inferiority towards women over these making powers? Know what I mean?*

David says:

Clearly, men are inferior! The bible tells us that women evolved from men, right?! The conception of life is a really wonderful thing that can be interpreted as both a gift and a curse at once. Men can merely watch with bewilderment as their partners begin to swell, transform, as new life begins to take shape. Of course, there are moments that afford us the opportunity to share this experience. As an active birthing partner, I have never been left out or felt any jealousy towards my partner but I have enjoyed the experience but man does seem to have a lesser biological function, or class complex at least. Yet, I maintain that if I ever had the opportunity of reincarnation then I would want to come back as a woman. I wouldn't return as a dolphin...I've never seen the point of that! Coming back as the opposite sex is the only true reference point one could ever hope to have. But then again, I don't suppose you'd want to come back as a man! That's probably a bit of a let down...unless you fancy having a cock and some ball bags to get in the way?

Claudia says:

But you always wanted to give a bit of an afterlife to the animals. How did you first get involved with taxidermy?

David says:

I used to collect skulls at around the age of five so the interest has been with me for a while. I taught myself taxidermy during college and it has been a skill which has adapted and stayed with me ever since. Perhaps taxidermy is the closest thing I can get to instilling new life into something, giving birth in effect. Yet, there is a loneliness that comes along with that. Taxidermy can be a pretty unsociable past time and hanging around with all these dead things can get you down. The results are rewarding so the process is acceptable. I'd see it as an outsider's hobby and that is something I can probably identify with.

Claudia says:

The Making aspect plays a very important role in your work, I mean in the production or in the craft sense of the word. When you make something, what is your relationship to the viewer? Do you have the audience in mind when you make your work?

David says:

Making is very important to me, as is my audience to a degree. My work seems to be as much process-led as it is ideas-driven but I am interested how different processes can be used to inform convergent ideas. I make that distinction because the act of 'making' can be a self-serving activity that satisfies personal ends, a therapy or repetition, even. The development of ideas largely informs the processes that will be used later to achieve or illustrate the work most appropriately. When finished works finally emerge into the public domain, i.e. to an audience in its widest sense, there are factors that must invariably come into consideration in order for the work to create a sense of engagement. Much of my work is about communication and I enjoy communicating my ideas, thoughts and experiences with other people. Hopefully, I am not totally 'outside' the public sphere that might then render my work impotent to the general public. It has been said that I am a bit of a renaissance man due to the fact that I physically 'make' all the work with my hands and my head. Perhaps this is part of the appeal? Having control over the production process is

important to me although I question how time effective this might be in terms of output and social engagement. But then, all artists have to do this until it gets to a point where work might be commissioned or be 'made' from your guidance...but I don't know if I'd like that.

Claudia says:

You live somewhere what others would consider as 'remote'. The audience is not always the art audience, but people like the sheep farmer you work with. Do you see that as a challenge or more an opportunity? Is there anywhere else you would like to live or work?

David says:

It has been very interesting working in a rural environment as a kind of an 'outsider' since it allows me to pursue things which I might not be able to do so readily in the city. For instance, I recently met two drivers who collect dead animals for the nearby knackers yard; they were more than happy to show me the carcasses in the back of their truck that comprised of a newly dispatched horse, a few cows, several sheep and a calf. The week previous they had to deal with a sperm whale that had been washed up on the beach...this meant having to dissect the animal with chainsaws in order to remove its dead weight. I was invited back to their depot to sift through the dead things that they receive daily from farmers, vets and gamekeepers. The local people here seem to accept me for what I do and seem interested to know what 'the artist' is up to next. The city does not seem to afford the same reception as out here; there appears to be a greater sense of suspicion, unlike the free license of the countryside. Saying that, there are many urban places that I would like to live and work...cities across Europe especially. Now is the time for me to expand my practice, to visit places further a-field. Travel will allow me to respond to new cultures, new folklore and mythologies and therefore broaden my understanding of the world around me. I say 'new' but this would mean new to me; and there is always something interesting to discover for a newcomer. There is an opportunity to see things that others tend to overlook as commonplace.

Claudia says:

There are thousands and one more questions I would have. But time (it's late now!) and space are limited. One last thing: Is there something in your head that you would like to make next?

David says:

Well, that's a bit of an open question...one that I'd like to leave that way. Suffice to say, I have plenty tricks up my sleeve but I am always interested in learning new processes and finding new pathways through uncharted territories. During my research for the Knockturne exhibition I revisited Duchamp's 'Bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even' that revealed many interesting new slants for conceptual interpretation. The work of Marcel Duchamp, Hans Bellmer and Francis Bacon has provided me with some coordinates for a new horizon. I'll let you know when I arrive...

Claudia says:

OK, thanks David, this gives us all a lot of things to think and dream about. Good Night!

David says:

Thanks Claudia, it's been a pleasure. Sleep well.