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# CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WOMEN ARTISTS

In their own words

REBECCA FORTNUM

I.B. TAURIS  
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# INTRODUCTION

## Something of the moment

Rebecca Fortnum

I think there are artistic truths that hit something of the moment of when they are made.

GILLIAN AYRES

This collection of interviews with British women artists captures a moment in time, to record how and why contemporary art gets made (1). In doing so it reveals the artists as individuals, articulating their experience of the world, contemplating their particular set of concerns. Often their integrity in doing so is overwhelming; a far cry from the charlatanism popularly associated with contemporary artists. Indeed, I feel these interviews confirm the existence of genuinely reflective art practice in the early twenty-first century.

One aspect of this book that becomes rapidly apparent is that the artist is audience as well as maker. When Anya Gallaccio marvels over the 'economy of gesture' in such different artists as Pina Bausch, Giotto and Vermeer, we quickly become aware of her finely honed ability to analyse an artwork's qualities and how that clarity of thought is then directed unflinchingly at her own practice. Like many of the artists represented in this book, this evidence of creative intelligence is all the more exciting for being so seldom a topic of discussion. For the abstract painter Maria Lalić, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* provides an epiphany as she realises the potential of her own work's form and structure. As a young artist, Hayley Newman hears John Cage for the first time and a whole world of possibilities for the future present themselves. Maria Chevskva's deep involvement with modernist literature generates new visual form, conversations with the texts she excavates. In reading these artists' ruminations, one becomes aware of them engaging with other practices, present and past, in a very real way. Listening, looking and thinking; they sift art's canons, finding works that will sustain them in their creative journeys.

Another sense that emerges from these interviews is that of the material practice of art. These artists *live in* their work. Painter Vanessa Jackson, eloquently borrowing from Heidegger, describes it as 'set[ting] up a space that I can dwell in'. What I understand by this is that the potential for thought and contemplation offered by making a work of art is hard to find in other spheres of existence and

requires total engagement. It exists in the complete technical and intellectual immersion in the materials and mechanics of making and can occur in any medium. This experience often eludes formal description, yet continually surfaces in these conversations. When Tacita Dean describes editing her film she confides, 'you see, I edit alone and I edit on film'. With this we form a sense of the intense, and perhaps necessarily solitary, decision making process. Runa Islam discusses how she felt making three film-based works from 1998 and says, 'naming the processes seemed impossible'. This to-ing and fro-ing between bewilderment and certainty, knowing and not knowing, is crucial to the creative process and is characteristic of this sense of *living in* a work. When Emma Kay gave up professional singing, she realised that it was the 'rigorous discipline' of daily exercising in the pursuit of perfection she would take with her into her text based 'memory' works. More traditionally, perhaps, painter Jane Harris marries the self sufficient and absorbing structures of geometry with her acute visual observations stemming from her art school training. Harris describes this balance of 'external' and 'internal' references, saying, 'it is to do with perception but there is a structure underlying it that has rules'. Her practice absorbs visual phenomena, relying on the integrity of its internal structures. This evidence must go some way to allay Clare Barclay's concern about the 'fracture between making and thinking' in current contemporary art practice. In these practices, thinking and making happen concurrently and inform each other. Barclay goes on to assert:

'I believe we mustn't lose touch with the world through making and understanding how things come about'.

The evidence, amongst these artists at least, is that this is far from the case.

Barclay's comment clearly reveals her belief that this sense of *living in* the work includes an ethical dimension. These art practices do not require an ivory tower, but rather a window to look out on the world. The work may contain ethical judgements yet hold back from didacticism. Often a note of urgency permeates these artists' words. When Jemima Stehli talks about reaching a crossroads in her practice ('I wanted to deal with the things which are really at stake'), it is clear that her ambition for her work is bound up with exploring issues important to her. Indeed, in different ways, for all these artists, the collision between ethics and experience is evident. For some, such as Christine Borland, this dimension forms the actual subject of the work. For others, like Lucy Gunning, it leaks out of the work's structure. Some tackle ethical issues explicitly. Both Paula Rego and Tracey Emin have made work about abortion that draws attention to women's real experience in contrast to the philosophical or legal perspectives of other public platforms. Tania Kovats's *Virgin in a Condom* has direct political implications yet emerged from a sustained dialogue around the notion of the Madonna 'as a

site' and an awareness of the way the work's meaning can shift in relation to its context. Indeed, it is only through this personal engagement with the material that the deep politics emerge. As Paula Rego says of her work:

'The painting is a thing on its own, apart from you. ....When I've finished it's telling *me* something.'

And of course it also tells others; the work mediates between its individual maker and the world, finding ways for both artist and audience to comprehend their surroundings. And there is something else. I believe that this desire to speak from experience about the world through an engaged material practice has the influence of feminism at its root.

Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker's seminal *Old Mistresses; Women, Art and Ideology* and other important works of feminist art history produced in the eighties, informed generations of female visual artists, including most of the artists in this book. Issues to do with the personal, the body, the domestic, as well as the use of low status techniques or materials, became validated as a consequence of these feminist explorations. In these interviews I believe we witness the impact of this feminist consciousness on art practice, both directly and indirectly. For example, the important 'feminist' artist Mary Kelly, who practised in the UK in the eighties, is cited by several of these artists as a key point of reference. The fact that none of the artists in this book define themselves as 'feminist artists' does not signal feminism's failure; this would be to misunderstand its strength. Indeed, the triumph of feminism (within the visual arts at least) has been its ability to integrate the real issues affecting women into the language of contemporary art. Feminism is a fundamental tool in our understanding of the world. For these artists, feminist issues take the form of the debates around ethics, power, representation, knowledge, memory and narrative, which are integral to their work. For example, artists as different as Jananne Al-Ani, Jemima Stehli and Christine Borland all record the way their practices have responded to the established feminist dialogue around the (female) body as object. Today we can detect feminist scholarship in the UK in the writings and exhibitions of a broad range of women theorists, artists and curators (2). Much of this work looks carefully at the artworks produced by women artists in order to analyse how it can contribute to feminist debate. This is important; for too long we have policed ourselves as good and bad feminists, feminists in life but not in art, in a cul-de-sac of recriminations. Now it seems possible that we might engage seriously with feminist issues in relation to the exciting work being made and shown today by successful women artists, without requiring it to be a straightforward celebration or a direct critique. Sonia Boyce embraces her political positioning as an artist but has developed a speculative approach to her practice. She says:

‘Now I don’t need to adhere to a declaration of intent; a right and a wrong. Instead I say, let’s just see what this is and how it unfolds’.

With this statement Boyce is not shunning her responsibilities, rather she is aware that the complexities of the ethical (and emotional) issues her artwork explores need particular and discursive forms to articulate them.

However, we are also in debt to feminist art history for spelling out another crucial fact. Artists, even those with contemporary success, cannot expect an assured place in the history books. Indeed, the lives and thoughts of women artists through the ages have often been painstakingly reassembled by feminist scholars to whom we owe the knowledge of their practice. This leaves us with an understanding of the importance of writing women ‘in’ to the story for future generations. This book aims to mark an investment in the account of women artists in the early twenty-first century for posterity. The impact of feminism has been far reaching, but not quite enough to sweep away the status quo of centuries. Let’s look briefly at the situation for British women artists in 2006. *Beck’s Futures*, the excellent talent spotting competition held annually since 2000 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, is a handy barometer of the contemporary art scene in this country. Just over a third (3) of the artists nominated for the award have been female. This is not to say that the competition discriminates against women; rather I think this figure represents the state of play for professional women artists. Of Turner Prize nominations, another very visible marker in the careers of young British artists, 27 per cent have been female (and less than 10 per cent of the winners). However, if we compare the early years (1984–1996) with more recent times (1997–2005), the figures show a leap from 19 per cent to 41 per cent of women artists nominated. So it is into this arena that this book goes. We have vast progress in the status of women artists but not equality, yet. Perhaps it should also be noted that we hardly start from a level playing field. In this country the vast majority of professional artists have been to art school and these art schools, for the last ten years at least, are made up of disproportionately more female students.

Lastly, a question remains in a book of this nature about the interviews themselves. What can artists contribute to the debate around their work? Recently, in my role as an academic researcher, I have initiated a project to document artists’ processes (4). A more detailed knowledge of creative processes allows us to establish models for practice as research and this is proving useful in our current academic climate. But this is more than merely responding to contemporary academic demands. I believe that once we have acknowledged the fact that works of art can never be fully translated into words, a range of multivalent narratives quite happily attach themselves to visual production. And, whilst the artists are here, and willing to answer questions, we have the



opportunity to add their voices to any discussion about their work. If it is clear that they do not hold the ‘meaning’ of their work as a privileged author, then their accounts can often extend our thoughts about their own artworks, often creating additional levels of understanding. This chance only exists during the artist’s lifespan, after that we cannot predict with complete certainty how these words, or indeed the work, will be valued. Personally, I am grateful to the interviewers of the painter Alice Neel whose witty observations seemed to strike a chord at an early stage of my own practice. Indeed, my artist self is always interested in hearing other artists talk of their work. Rarely, if ever, have I been disappointed. Articulate or otherwise, the mysterious relationship of an artist to their work can never be exhausted and is compulsive listening, particularly for those that also try to make.

I am all too aware that the current field of women artists practicing in the UK is vast and that I have selected only 20 artists from it. The artists were chosen to represent a cross section of practices from the UK’s art scene. You may detect bias, for which I can’t offer a defence – this is surely inevitable in such an endeavour. Bearing in mind that many of the readers of this volume will be artists themselves, often at an early stage in their career, I have often chosen to spend time tracing the paths of the artists’ development. Indeed, these artists provide a range of models for how creative practice can evolve. I admire all the artists in this book enormously and have found their reflections fascinating. I hope you will too.

## NOTES

- 1 Tacita Dean, Jane Harris and Tania Kovats interviews took place in 2001, Gillian Ayres, Maria Lalic, Maria Chevaska, Vanessa Jackson in 2004 and all others in 2005.
- 2 I’m thinking, for example, of writing by Maria Walsh, Paula Smithard, Marsha Meskimmon or Rosemary Betterton or exhibitions such as *Warped* (Angel Row Gallery, 2002), *And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other* (Ormeau Baths Gallery, 2003), *Unframed*, (Standpoint Gallery, 2004), *Her Noise* (South London Gallery, 2005) or symposiums such as *Mediated Pleasures in (post) Feminist Contexts*, convened by Sue Tate and Clare Johnson at the University of West of England in 2005.
- 3 27 out of 73 nominated artists in Beck’s Futures (2000 – 2006) have been female. Interestingly, there has been an equal split between male and female winners. Since 2001 there have been 32 judges, 12 of them female.
- 4 The *Visual Intelligences Research Project*, at the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts, Lancaster University where I am currently Research Fellow.



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# ANYA GALLACCIO

Anya Gallaccio is known for large-scale sculptural installations that employ organic materials. Her early work used vast quantities of flowers and she continues to juxtapose stable and unstable materials. The work often creates a visual spectacle, for example a piece from 1996, *Intensities and Surfaces*, centred on a 32-ton block of ice.

RF                    What drew you towards making art?

AG                    I resisted going to college straight from school – at 18 I wasn't interested in staying in education. But I drew a lot and travelled for a bit and ended up in the wardrobe department at the Royal Court Theatre. Then I met Michael Morris who was then running the theatre at the ICA. I went to Paris to see Pina Bausch and to a festival in Holland to see Anna Teresa De Keersmaeker and other performers. A whole new world opened up to me. I became aware of working practices where there seemed to be no hierarchy between performer, director and designer – a true collaboration that I found both exciting and inspiring.

While I was at Kingston University in London doing an Art Foundation course, it became apparent to me that most theatre isn't like that and that the visual aspect of it is secondary to the text or the director's vision. The tutors at Kingston said I was too idiosyncratic to be a designer. At that point I was determined to do something that was vocational because I wanted to be able to support myself, so I really resisted going to art school. There weren't many women artists visible then; it wasn't very long ago but it feels like a different world. I didn't fit neatly into sculpture or painting and so Goldsmiths College at London University, that offered fine art as opposed to subject areas, was the only place I felt that I could go. I really struggled whilst I was there. The artist Richard Wentworth, who was a tutor, persuaded me to stay, citing this list of people who were successful in their fields – entrepreneurs, restaurateurs, designers, record producers, musicians – who had gone to art school.

RF                    But when you wanted to leave, what were your reasons?

- AG I felt that I was being self-indulgent and it was too abstract just making stuff. I work better to a deadline and within a structure, so being able to do anything felt a bit wanky to me. It was a real struggle. I was always fighting with myself.
- RF You have said that your degree show was a disaster.
- AG Yes, it was. I bodged it up, I included too much stuff and it didn't make any sense. The main thing that I wanted to show got thrown away. I was working with found and organic objects and I was growing weeds in this rusty frame of a toy pram that was outside in the alleyway because it needed sunlight. Everyone saw it in the skip and thought it odd, but no one mentioned it to me until it had gone. Because I'd got it into my head that the whole show was based around it, I just panicked and put everything in.
- RF You joined a grand tradition of artists getting their work chucked away like Joseph Beuys!
- AG It was a really brutal lesson. So I learned to be a bit more flexible. I was feeling pretty despondent, but then I started work on *Freeze* with Damien [Hirst] and all of a sudden I had a space and a set of parameters, so I had another opportunity.
- RF And this time you were clear about what it was for?
- AG Yes. I was showing with Gary [Hume]'s paintings. He was making door paintings and they hung very low, virtually on the floor. I knew that I couldn't make anything high that would interfere visually with what he'd done. The more restrictions Damien imposed, the clearer my choices became; I poured a ton of lead on the floor. Pouring the lead and working directly in the space opened up a whole new set of possibilities for me and then I was invited to do another show. Something clicked into place in my brain and I'd found a way I could allow myself to make things. I continued working in the theatre doing costumes, props and stage-managing. Later I remember having an argument with one of my contemporaries who felt that I wasn't an artist because I had a job.
- RF Perhaps if the money hadn't been coming from a different source, you would have been forced to make different kinds of works.
- AG Yes, absolutely. I was pretty resourceful and my outgoings were low. This way I managed to retain my independence and continue to work in interesting

places. I feel that if I've achieved anything, I've done it on my own terms, which is important to me. Obviously, loads of people have helped me and I would never diminish the importance of that support, but I feel that I earned it.

RF If you start delving into most successful artists' financial backgrounds you find that a lot of them had a head start.

AG Yes, but I also find that not having much money forces you to be more creative. Sometimes when I've had too much money to throw at a problem, I haven't looked at it from all angles. On the other hand, being really stressed, with no money, totally cripples you. If you've got a bit of money, it just switches one button off at the back of your brain and allows you to spend your energy on problems that are more interesting.

RF If you're out of the studio because you're working, how does that affect the pacing of the work and the development?

AG I've stopped teaching because I found it too disruptive. I'd wake up in the middle of the night with the solution to someone else's problem! My problem now is that I take on too many projects and the thinking time gets eaten into. I always underestimate how much time you need to sit and read or be still with an object in a space. That's an important part of the process, it can give you the answer to what to do next. Mostly the requirements of the space come first. Sometimes I respond formally or architecturally, which will get me started. Over the years I've built up a large vocabulary or palette of materials. I think that working with ephemeral materials has a lot of limitations, so I've changed the way that I've been using materials.

RF Maybe to begin with you knew less about how your materials reacted and now you can predict things?

AG Yes, I like not knowing what is going to happen. I don't want to illustrate a process. The process is what I'm interested in, so I have to extend that vocabulary. It's a collaboration between the material and me.

RF But how do you bridge that gap between your initial concept and what it is? How do you experiment?

AG There's an organic balance between the mental process and planning and the physical/material process that doesn't come into play until you're in the space.

I'm excited by the gap between the idea and the action. It's tricky working in institutions because you have to plan so far ahead, and they want to be confident about what they will get. When you're working in a studio this aspect is generally worked out in private. When you're working with fabricators or technicians there's more slippage because there's another layer of communication and translation.

RF Is there any leeway to change things?

AG Often there's not really much you can do. The ice piece at Wapping [*Intensities and Surfaces*, 1996] was made in one day. One of the slabs cracked when we were installing it and I left it broken. I try to accept the inconsistencies of the processes and materials that I use. We took the scaffolding down the day of the opening, so that was the first time I saw the object in the space. I had three hours to get my head round the idea that this was my piece of work.

RF You have said that you don't want the 'workings out' to show and you want it to look easy. Why's that?

AG I think a lot of the time work that shows technical expertise and effort is applauded. I always compare it to cooking; Italian food is pared down to one or two ingredients. I'm much more in awe of the purity and discipline of this approach than the skill involved in High French cuisine. For me, when my work is successful, I'm surprised by it. There's an emotional resonance, something that I can't put into words, that happens between you and the object or in the space. That is what excites me and keeps me going. I went to the Donald Judd ranch in Marfa, Texas and saw the work with a hundred or so aluminium boxes. It was a truly sublime experience and I cannot articulate how those objects produce such an emotional response. It was incredible.

RF I think there are contrary impulses working together in your work. One seems to be about something that's slight and the other is about spectacle, almost bodily shock.

AG When I think of the works of Pina Bausch, Giotto and Vermeer, there's an economy of gesture underlying a strong emotional resonance; it punches you. An invisible tension, undeniable and inexplicable. I'm fascinated by how something so restrained can be so charged.

RF It was quite brave of you to go from those flower pieces under glass, which were overwhelming, to the lighter daisy chains.

- AG The flower and glass works were very straightforward; taking an apparently ‘serious’ structure like the minimal grid and using an emotionally loaded material but in a matter of fact way. Like the painting with the chocolate, [e.g. *Couverture*, 1994] it’s about taking out the gesture and seeing if the material itself has the capacity to resonate emotionally. I always found it disingenuous that you should look at a Judd or Richard Serra work as a purely objective entity. I have a physical reaction to some of those works; I feel intimidated by them or frightened. With the flower works I made a conscious choice to make them appear easy, to hide the effort involved...the daisy chains are a pain to do! The chains offered me an opportunity to respond more spontaneously and occupy the space. It felt like drawing in space. Again, the experience of them in actuality is very different to them flattened out in photographs.
- RF There has been some discussion of the feminisation of minimalism. I remember seeing a show subtitled *Women Artists and Minimalism in the 90s* at the MOMA in New York. Did you see your work in relation to that?
- AG Yes, at the time. I initially took the structures from that language and filled them with a different agenda to see what would happen. Most of the artists who were visible here when I started, Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller, Victor Burgin were making theory-driven works. Often I felt that you had to have read something before you could look. I thought this was exclusive and sometimes intimidating. It wasn’t sensual or physical at all. A lot of women artists’ work was being marginalised as being too subjective or emotional. There seemed to be an alternative system where this work existed. The work that I was drawn to – Judd, Serra, Carl Andre – seemed to be admired for its objectivity and purity. This seemed like an interesting problem to tackle. I felt there was a gap, a place to occupy. Mapplethorpe could work with flowers, could I work with flowers and have them taken seriously?
- RF In an interview in 1996 you said you were a Romantic but in 2002 you said you weren’t. I wondered whether that reflected a change in you or the use of the word?
- AG I would say that I’m a Romantic in terms of being idealistic; I have an unrealistic expectation of life. I’m also very pragmatic, very down to earth and straightforward, there’s a contradiction in the way I work.
- RF I saw it in terms of a relationship to Romanticism, that there’s a spiritual remit for the work, that it’s meditative or has some capability to replicate the sublime associated with landscape.

AG           Possibly. I think I'm old-fashioned in what I want from art; I don't want it to be an entertainment, I like to be still with things. For a painting or sculpture to be rewarding you have to give it time. I like being in a museum when there's not very many people, and when you're allowed to make your own connections. It's all about those experiences that are unexplainable and if you try to articulate them, it becomes really clunky. I'm fascinated when you see someone moved to tears in front of a painting. I understand how the movies or music trigger your emotions but an inanimate object, paint, or stone or clay? I'm really in awe of that.

RF           Your work is often seen as ephemeral but it is also durable because it can be remade. I went to a talk by Howard Caygill about destruction in art and he was asking why we think about destruction of art as being a terrible thing. He pointed out that everything made is destroyed, quite often by the makers themselves. He said the strange thing isn't that things die but that we try to preserve them.

AG           Yes, I always felt that that the flower works were a practical solution; you had the instructions and the permission to remake them. They didn't need to be maintained and preserved. They exist for a moment in time. It's really hard to perceive work as it was seen when it was first produced. You see something that you know was radical but it looks dusty and faded like those Fontana paintings. It's hard to feel the exhilaration and the edginess they must have had. I can't decide whether it's important to feel shocked or whether admiring them as beautiful objects diminishes them? I've been really amazed by the amount of energy and effort that goes into preserving and protecting things. Often there are huge battles going on within museums between the people who look after the objects and the people who want to show the objects.

I remember going to see the Sistine Chapel when it had just been cleaned and people were appalled because it was so bright and garish. We feel we know the work in its more muted state. The Eva Hesse exhibition [Tate Modern, 2002] was like an archaeological excavation! She knew those materials were going to perish when she was working with them. Would she have just shown things until they fell to bits or would she have remade them? It seems that once people have invested money in a work it becomes sanctified, it's a relic. I wish they had made an exhibition copy of some of the work so you could have seen how different the work looked when the material was fresh and if it changed how you responded to the work. She didn't seem to be that precious; it seemed to me to be much more about the process and trying things out.



RF I was at this seminar the other day where the sculptor Alison Wilding was talking about Rachel Whiteread's *House*. She said that by it not existing it lives in people's minds and is extremely powerful.

AG Like the artists who died young and have become canonised, they had the luxury of not fucking up. Then you get Mario Merz or Warhol, who lived a full life, who had plenty of opportunities to make some dud work.

RF And they've taken them, on occasion.

AG Personally, I find that exciting. You should be allowed to make mistakes.



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# CHRISTINE BORLAND

Christine Borland makes installed artworks that are concerned with the way the body becomes socialised. Her work often meditates on ethics and employs forensic technologies. She has used drawings, films, found objects, sculptures, and even dust, to explore these issues.

RF           What kind of things were you doing at college?

CB           I can't get away from the fact that amongst other things I was looking at Judy Chicago, the *Womanhouse* project [1972] and making sculpture that looked like 3-D versions of Georgia O'Keeffe.

RF           That was in the mid eighties when the 'New Glasgow Boys' [Stephen Campbell, Peter Howson, Ken Currie] were very dominant in the UK.

CB           Yes. My tutor Sam Ainsley was the only woman who was in any position of authority within Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art. I was in the Environmental Art Department because the Sculpture and Painting Departments were very medium specific and it was hard to step outside the boundaries of their traditional materials. Environmental Art was called 'Murals' when I started, the name was a kind of hangover from the seventies. It was a place where people who didn't fit in ended up, so there was lots of discussion, film projects and installation. It was a really live, fantastic place! Then I went to Belfast [University of Ulster] which, looking back, was a very important move. I knew that I didn't want to go to London for my MA. I'd visited it enough to feel that the kind of emphasis there was not really what I needed. Belfast had Alistair McClelland, a performance artist, who was an amazing, charismatic guy and an inspirational teacher. Because of the situation it didn't feel like a place to make monuments; everyone was doing temporary work, ephemeral stuff, installation, performance.....

RF           So what kind of stuff were you doing there?

CB           I was always sniffing around markets and sales of bomb damaged goods. I surrounded myself with a lot of stuff that I then began to use in the work.

The pieces previously had been sculptural but these were exploring space using installation. They still had a feminist aesthetic, if that's the correct term. They were trying to come to terms with the situation there, which was extremely complex. Whenever you thought something appeared to be one thing, it turned out to be something else. The sculptures had a façade and then a reverse side showing the true picture – they were literal in that respect. I suppose it was only when I moved away that I was able to make work dealing with the influences, situations and ideas that I'd had when I was there. For example, relatively often I'd pass cars whose windows had bullet holes. Shattered glass was something that stayed with me, it was so powerfully attractive and repellent, but there was no way I could use that image while I was there.

RF There was a feminist taboo about using the body in the UK then.

CB Yes, *The Subversive Stitch* [Roszika Parker, 1984] was my bible when I was in Belfast! I was trying to deal with how to represent the body without it actually being present, so that was very much an issue. The process of doing it was also very important. I had to make contacts within the anatomy department of the University, speak to people, go into dissection theatres and try to borrow a skeleton. I was given the name of a company where I could buy or borrow a skeleton, so I called up and they asked if I wanted 'natural' bone or plastic and that was the start of the reconstruction project, *From Life*. But from 1990 to 1994 I went through a period of being obsessed with forensic methodologies. The work that I feel was my first mature piece was called *Supported* and was shown in 1990 at what was the Third Eye Centre, now the Centre for Contemporary Arts, in Glasgow. It was in a group show with Douglas Gordon, Roddy Buchanan, Craig Richardson and Kevin Henderson, that we curated ourselves, titled *Self Conscious State*. I was interested in the history of the representation of the body in medicine, and went regularly to the anatomy museum in Glasgow University. This was the first piece where I used elements of the body and the skeleton but there was actually nothing present, just dust. That was a pleasing way of representing the body.

RF That led to work with researchers and professionals from other disciplines. What is that like?

CB I don't always have an exact idea in my mind and so often work develops from things shown me or anecdotes told me. It's always an interesting series of dialogues within institutions, finding the right person to work with. It's often someone who's considered slightly eccentric or a maverick within the institution.

- RF Did you also become aware of different ways of thinking?
- CB Oh yes, very much. I suppose my work tries to tease out both the connections and divides between the scientific mode of exploration and the artistic one. I'm in the middle, somehow bringing the two together. Generally the people that surround me are people who have an interest in the implications of what they're doing and how it affects society, whereas not everyone in the laboratory would. I always get to a point where I'm grateful not to have to follow their rules. It takes time for an idea to generate something that may become a piece of work. So this process of long-term investigation has become a good way for me to progress. Gathering and documenting is a way of keeping going. The work itself is often two years behind my research.
- RF Your work seems to look out to the world, rather than examine art history or sign systems. When you first started showing, that kind of conceptual investigation was rare in this country. What kind of reception did you encounter?
- CB I'd say that most of my friends or artists I hung around with were also working like this. I suppose earlier on we used the language of conceptual art and minimalism more self consciously. Often I was dealing with complex issues with different ethical dimensions but I wanted the presentation to be simple, so I also borrowed from the formal language of minimalism or conceptual art, although the basis of the work was more politicised. People just went out and did things, either in public situations or site specifically. On the Environmental Art course, we had a project every year where you had to realise an ephemeral piece outside the art school. You had to negotiate how to do that and it became a modus operandi. You can't do that without getting engaged with people. We were all supporting each other and I suppose in that aspect it related to Damien Hirst's year at Goldsmiths and the shows they put on. It was self-generating, there was a real feeling that if someone was doing a show somewhere they'd ask if they could bring their friends and that generated the buzz around the Transmission Gallery where we were working. People became aware there were artists working in Glasgow and there was something worth making a trip for.
- RF Reviewers tend to pigeon-hole your work as art versus science and this seems simplistic because you don't set up an either/or situation.
- CB When doing a piece I usually try to make the processes obvious, demonstrations or talks will be part of the exhibition. I try to build in a sense

of the layers of complexity that I'm dealing with. It goes back to Belfast where, on this side of the water, I was used to the situation being presented as a rather crude divide but once you think about the actual people involved in day-to-day situations, the complexities get interesting.

RF But maybe that goes back to that early interest in feminism, about the personal being political?

CB Yes. It's just something that's always there. It's not that I'm gathering information or data and then I go back to the studio and make the two things are much more interconnected and overlapping. It's always important to me to be working with materials and often some surprising things will happen that might throw me. I can't bear to use the word 'intuitive', but the discoveries naturally feed back in and, somehow, always relate to the idea.

RF It must happen that objects don't function in the way that you think they might?

CB I've been using a room in my house, working on quite a small-scale investigation and then large-scale things come together in the exhibition space and surprise me. I can feel frustrated that I don't see the things until it's too late, so I'm building a studio at the moment. It's difficult to bring all the elements together and I often have to get things fabricated for me. But it's a regular problem; it's just something that you have to deal with.

RF Does the object need to be transformed?

CB There's a pragmatic aspect of working with private galleries. They like it if you make a piece of work that doesn't change into something else and can be for sale. One thing that's always been important to me is installing work myself and being at liberty to change the work. How it'll be described in terms of being an object that's part of a market is for somebody else to worry about. There are things that are impossible to realise completely within one piece of work, so I take either the material or the undeveloped aspects of the idea on with me to the next work.

RF *From Life*, where you traced the provenance of a skeleton sold for medical purposes, must have provided some ethical dilemmas?

CB Yes, that was really hard, but it's good to put yourself in these situations. It would be too easy to make critiques of science or medicine without implicating oneself.

- RF Did you get criticism?
- CB I don't know whether there's anything in print but certainly, when I did talks some people would be quite hostile. Within the work I reached a point where I didn't want to progress further with the reconstruction or the tracing to reach any definitive 'conclusion'. I knew that the circumstances were going to be tragic and that was enough. There was always a place to stop, creating my own ethical parameters; I made these decisions for myself. I think it was important to actually go ahead and purchase that skeleton because it put me right at the middle of those ethical questions.
- RF As did *L'Homme Double* [1997], the piece where you commissioned six sculptors to make busts of the Nazi doctor Josef Mengele from very little information. What ideas were you exploring then?
- CB I was researching the Münster sculpture project and 'found' these heads in the University's anatomy museum, within a teaching context. It didn't take much questioning to find out that the department had a dark history in eugenics and that during the war it had been one of the leading universities promoting 'racial hygiene'. Mengele's teacher had taught here, and there was lots of study material from the camps. I wanted to deal with the heads' provenance but, although they'd survived the bombing during the war, any records of where they'd come from, or why, had been lost. So I made the work, *The dead teach the living* [1997] where I recreated these heads in different materials.
- RF So how did they feel about a Scottish artist investigating it?
- CB Fine. It's typical of the situation in Germany now; they had someone at the University from the Philosophy Department whose fulltime job was to find ways to deal with the history of this university in relation to the war. They just hadn't got round to this. So when I said I was interested in trying to trace the identities of these nameless faces, it was seen as a positive way to deal with the situation. They were able to make facilities and researchers available to me who accumulated a mass of things, like medical records, to look through. But within this German situation I couldn't be as specific as I was with the Mengele piece. In Britain we've looked at years of war films and personalities like him are at the forefront of our consciousness yet occupying a territory between fact and fiction. Here it felt more relevant to deal with the idea. What interested me was to do with the façade presented. Mengele was constantly described as handsome, even by his victims. That desire to conjure the face of evil was something that fitted in with my ongoing concerns. I started off speaking to a

group of portrait sculptors and it grew from there. All I gave them was descriptions and a copy of a bad photograph of someone who might have been Mengele.

RF Can you just tell me a bit more about what you're working on at the moment?

CB I've moved away from thinking about the historical aspects of eugenics but a more contemporary interest in genetics has continued. The human genome project was happening and coincidentally I was pregnant myself and more forms of genetic testing have become possible. Now I've started getting involved with ideas in medical humanities, working with groups of medical students. My last show at the Lisson Gallery in London [*Simulated Patient*, 2004] looked at medical students involved in role-play with actors. It's part of their training, seeing how they deal with certain situations, and has a real performative element. Communication Studies is a huge issue within medical training and I feel as if there's an artist's point of view in there. Things that they're talking about, like the use of silence or of body language or eye contact, have been written about and discussed within critiques of contemporary performance art. I try to be the artist's eye within that discipline and explore it from an artist's perspective.

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CHRISTINE BORLAND

***Bullet Proof Breath, 2001***  
**Glass, spider's silk, steel**  
34 × 22 × 22cm

Image courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London



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