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An artist Interview by Becky Dick

Becky Dick talks to Joanne Humphreys BA PGCE - an accomplished fine artist who has used taxidermy in her recent body of work for her MA Fine Art course.

What's your background?

I grew up and began my education surrounded by the beautiful landscape of Blaenau Ffestiniog, North Wales.

After leaving school in 1982, I completed an Art and Design Foundation Course in Bangor, North Wales. It was during the residential part, at the base of Mount Snowdon, that I won an award for the work that I produced during the course. It was around this time while studying in Bangor that I developed an interest in animals and the museum. Having worked for weeks inside the Zoology Museum at Bangor University, I created a variety of sculptures and drawings based on Crocodile skulls. From then on, my interest in animals became a constant in my work.

I completed my BA Hons in Fine Art at the Cheltenham College of Arts in 1986. I sold my first painting during the degree show. The painting was a running goose. It was painted with oil on canvas. The canvas was 4x6ft. Animals continued to be a focus during this time, especially birds, but more importantly creating movement in my work.

I did my first large show a year after graduation back in Wales. Some of the works I sold at the time remain in private collections in the area to this day. When I had my retrospective exhibition in 2015, It was quite easy to remember where the paintings were, especially the ones with friends and family.

I have exhibited nationally and sold work internationally over the past 35 years.

I have been a member of the Cheltenham Open Studios group of artists since 2011, exhibiting my work locally.

I have a studio based in Cheltenham, but due to the current situation with the pandemic, I have moved my studio to my home.



How would you describe your work?

The subject of my work determines the medium I use. Sometimes it can be a combination of different media, including film.

The oil paintings that I have focused on in recent years have served their purpose for me to express a personal connection with nature and my relationships with friends and family.



The plants are specifically chosen to symbolise a memory of a friend or a member of family. The Geckos are a symbol of the times I spent with my son when he was terminally ill with cancer. They were all around us when we went to Florida for a family holiday. They turned out to be companions during our walks, scurrying around our feet.



I took on a project in 2012 to work with woodcarving and screen printing on another subject close to my heart - disability, specifically Down Syndrome. My son who has Down Syndrome is now nearly 14 years old. At the time I took on the project I wanted to celebrate the positives of the disability but also it became a cathartic process from my experiences of the prejudices in society against disabilities of all descriptions. Unfortunately, discrimination and inequalities are a constant presence in our lives.

The linear portraits combined with the woodcuts proved to be a combination of complexity and simplicity of the true nature of Down Syndrome. This was when I began working with the moving image and created a film called 'The Dis'. I used my poem as a spoken narrative throughout the film piece. The final exhibition in 2015 at the Atrium Gallery in Cardiff was very successful combining the theme of Art and Science.

You have been studying an MA Fine Art at Hereford College of Art. What does your work aim to say?

My initial proposal for the Masters was to explore how meaning and materiality works in relation to my own personal experience of death and grief.

My practice developed initially through objects left behind by my son after he died. I worked on porcelain to create small sculptures depicting the drawings that he made during his illness.



In January 2020 I produced and directed a film called 'The Process', a collaboration with the film-maker Lee Matthews. The film is a cathartic look on the grieving process with full body costumes made to depict the 'inside out' guinea pig, filmed in a remote wooded area where the screen takes you on a journey of ritualistic burning of MRI images, photos and x-ray images originating from the time when my son Graeme had his treatment for cancer. In the background you will hear the music composed by Gustav Mahler based on the poem written in memory of a dead child. (All films can be viewed from her website)

For the final module, I had planned on working a site response to Cambridge Zoology Museum, having visited the place the previous year. The focus moved from the museum to the 'Virtual Museum' inside the home of the taxidermist, my daughter Becky. This came about from having been invited to the Guild of Taxidermists' Conference just before lockdown. Inspired by some amazing talks by guest speakers such as anthropologist Petra Tidjeski and Pat Morris, I began to focus my attention on x-ray imaging of taxidermy.



Looking at the x-ray images, the different shape armatures and glass eyes of different specimens looks intriguing. Pat was very helpful during lockdown as we communicated by phone and email. One of the papers that Petra shared with me was about the extinct Great Auk. I felt inspired to look into this further in terms of working on sculpture based on the Great Auk. The approach was more to do with bringing back to life what is extinct, but at the same time focusing on what lies beneath and bringing that to the forefront.

A combination of materials - oak, Japanese paper, teal, porcelain, steel, concrete, and fabrics - were used to make the sculptures as a site response approach from the taxidermist's home.

(Current exhibition at Canwood Gallery from 10th October 2020)



You have used taxidermy in your work. How do you think that has shaped your work?

Entering the world of taxidermy was more about being able to look more closely at the specimens - the patterns on birds' feathers, the shape of their beaks, the creases in their webbed feet. It's very difficult to get up close to see such detail in a living specimen. This has made me think more about combining delicate materials such as Japanese paper with wire and wood in my sculpture.



Using wire armature and the use of natural materials like wood has also influenced my work.

I am also very aware of the fact that I was privileged to see the skills involved in taxidermy, bringing back to life what would be discarded and forgotten about.

You have created a video piece called 'Lockdown Museum' which is so intriguing. What does it mean to you and what do you want to portray to the viewer?

Creating the film was a starting point to the project. After looking at samples of 'Lockdown Museum' programmes on mainstream TV, I felt that the way they had been filmed was very orchestrated to provide the viewer with limited access to artefacts inside the museum; also, the building itself dissolved into the background, making you feel that the objects could be displayed anywhere.



Right: Joanne Humphreys (left) winning the Sidney Nolan Trust Artist in Residency Award



My aim as the viewer behind the camera was to create a film that would combine detail from worked specimens and opaque shots to question what the viewer is looking at.

I stained an 8x4 voile fabric with blue drawing ink, then I drew images of x-ray taxidermy over the voile with a bleaching effect.

I wanted to use this as a filter on front of the camera at certain points. This was to emphasise on the layering of what we can and can't see through the lens of the moving image.

Glass domes, plaques, stacks of wooden bases and pictures of birds on the walls, and not to mention the completed commissioned works of taxidermy displayed in the front room waiting for their owner to collect them at the end of lockdown, are segments in the film. The sound became a combination of the silence of lockdown, the sound of birds in the garden, a reading from Emily Dickinson's poem, 'Because I could not stop from Death' and some narrative text from a classic natural history book on birds. I wanted to use the experience of lockdown in the film, using the 'vintage' filter to give the film an other-worldly effect - but more importantly, the isolation of the whole situation, leaving the taxidermist standing by the back door, in silhouette, looking outside as the final shot.

Finally, what are your future plans after your MA?

I am planning to continue working on the same theme. I am also in the process of arranging dates for future exhibitions next summer in collaboration with taxidermist Becky Dick.

My thanks to:

Becky Dick - taxidermist

Pat Morris - zoologist

Petra Tjidski Kalshoven - anthropologist

The Guild of Taxidermists

Ian Rosen

Hereford College of Arts

You can view Joanne's latest work at www.joannehumphreysartist.com

Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/joartist>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/joanneartist>

LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/joannehumphreys/>

HCA College of Arts website: <https://www.hca.ac.uk/>

Canwood Gallery website: <https://www.canwoodgallery.com>