

Transcript of the Fermynwoods Contemporary Art Podcast - Episode 1
Sarah Gillett

[excerpt of sound piece Well Well by Sarah Gillett]

<gasp>

Falling and falling, down, down, down she fell

Down, down, down she went

Down she went, could not stop herself falling

Either the well was very deep or she fell very slowly

The well is very deep, it's too dark to see the bottom

Well

Let me see

But it was too dark to see anything

Down, down, down

I'm still falling

It is a very long way down..."

JESSICA HARBY: Hello and welcome to the Fermynwoods Contemporary Art Podcast. I'm your host and Assistant Director at Fermynwoods, Jessica Harby.

Fermynwoods is an educational charity and arts organisation that supports life through art. We started over 20 years ago as a physical gallery space in our founder Rosalind Stoddart's Northamptonshire home, however we've existed as a peripatetic organisation for the majority of those years, commissioning artists to work with everyday audiences in public spaces across Northamptonshire and online.

This podcast will feature artist talks, discussions, original commissioned sound art and audio essays. When we began planning the podcast in 2019 as an extension of our programming, we thought it would be great to treat it as a kind of audio gallery space, one that's fully accessible from people's homes. Especially as our in-person venues and sites tend to be rural and sometimes difficult to get to. We wanted to bring something special to those who couldn't travel to experience our in-person talks and exhibitions.

Well. As I'm recording this in April 2020, that's currently most of us, as we shelter from the COVID-19 pandemic. I speak for everyone at Fermynwoods when I say I hope this finds you well and safe and taking care of both your physical and mental health.

I'm pleased that this first episode is a talk with Sarah Gillett, a featured presence in our two-year programme In Steps of Sundew. Sarah Gillett is an artist and writer investigating the life of things across space and time, as well as across media. We heard a bit of her sound piece Well Well earlier, constructed from 20 audiobooks of Alice in Wonderland, and will be listening to another sound work at the end of the talk.

In what I like to call The Before Time, we commissioned Sarah to produce artworks for multiple sites across Northamptonshire over the next two years. We'll be talking a bit about the work she's started for those exhibitions, as well as her overall practice.

A quick note that this discussion involves references to visual content, a link to which is available in the podcast description or at our website fermynwoods.org.

We're happy to have you and hope you enjoy.

[excerpt of sound piece Well Well by Sarah Gillet]

...After such a fall as this

I could fall anywhere, I could fall down, down, down

Down, down, down

Plenty of time as she went down

To wonder...

JESSICA HARBY: Hi Sarah!

SARAH GILLETT: Hi Jessica, how are you?

JH: I'm great, how are you doing?

SG: I'm ok. It's a beautiful day today and quite a strange time obviously at the moment. But also apt because I've been thinking a lot about dark spaces and negative spaces and turning those into a place where we can connect in a different way. Which actually links really well into the work that I'm making at the moment.

JH: I was thinking of thanking you for being here, but as you said "here" is not here, it's there. We're recording this apart. You're in your home in London and I am in my closet in Northampton. I don't want this discussion to necessarily be the self isolation podcast episode, but it is going to be hard not to talk about it, this is the context we're in. You and I have been keeping in touch through all of this and I have to start with asking, how are you managing to be so creatively productive right now?

SG: It's a funny thing, isn't it? I think although it's challenging, a lot of what I'm interested in is about slightly unusual circumstances or bizarre encounters of some kind, it's actually a really interesting space in which to be making work. For a long time I've felt that the kind of work I make and my working style has been deeply unfashionable, and then suddenly I'm finding that making work about ghosts and meteorites and science-fiction-y things happening to the sea is suddenly almost part of our living world. Especially in the piece of writing I've been doing in the moment, I've been looking at what astronauts dream of when they're in space...

JH: Based on fact?

SG: Based on fact. I've been looking at different sleep research and sleep labs' research with astronauts and what is interesting is that the longer astronauts are in space, on the ISS or if they're going and doing some stuff in their world, the longer they're out of the atmosphere of our planet, the more they dream of our planet. And so the dreams that astronauts have are very mundane, they're about ordinary, domestic things. I like the idea that in this very extreme environment, the mundane is the thing that is jarring. And obviously at the moment, the situation that we're in, I know from myself and other friends and even research being done on people at the moment about people's dreaming and sleeping patterns right now, people are remembering more dreams more vividly. Whether that is because people aren't sleeping as well or whether it is a sense of uncertainty, I don't know, but I think it's really interesting to think about how our external environment leaks into our subconscious and what happens in our imagination without us necessarily wanting it to. But equally that can be a great spring for creativity and for new thoughts that otherwise we wouldn't necessarily have had.

JH: It's interesting that you mentioned that the rest of the world's almost caught up with you and your headspace and what you're interested in making art about. You sent me your audio work Well Well, and I've heard that piece before, and what really struck me about it is that it felt so current, because it is about being lost in a never-ending moment. And of course right now we are all suspended in a kind of collective moment which will have an end, but the end is certainly not in sight or anything that we can plan for. It's very interesting that you've had that insight as well about your work as well right now.

Is the astronaut dream work something you were researching before you locked yourself in your house or did that come after?

SH: I started researching it actually probably a month before I was locked in my house. But I think it's really interesting how the things that I'm interested in around night and landscapes of the night - whether that is a physical landscape or whether it's about the moon and the light of the moon or whether it is about dreams or the things that we think are there in the night - are always present for me in my work, anyway. I started looking at astronauts' dreams and then with this situation what I picked up on was obviously the connection that I was interested in in terms of the stories that were coming out around our time in the moment. So I guess I tuned into this little strand of the news around dreams and what's happening with people's dreams at the moment, and mental health, and thinking around that. So it's interesting for me to actually be able to contextualise what I'm thinking about in a new environment. And also, we're all in our own little pods at the moment. It is a little like being in the experience of an astronaut because we're limited in terms of our daily experience and if we don't have gardens or yards to sit out in, if we do have a window then we are looking out the window and seeing it through glass and through something but not able to physically touch it.

The weather has been so beautiful mostly during this time as well, that the colours are so vibrant, the trees, the tree outside here has just blossomed, there's all those beautiful trees with all their fluffy blossom everywhere and then that lime green with the new leaves of the trees, and it's incredibly intense with that blue, blue sky. It's made me think of, again, the first time an astronaut looks back at our planet in space, and what that experience must be like. It must be for some people a very profound, life-changing moment to see our planet and the blue and the clouds, from that distance and to recognise the value of that. That experience for astronauts is called the overview effect, because it's a moment of contextualisation of realisation of our very, very small individual place in the universe and almost incomprehension of how we could be part of this beautiful, magical world that we can see in front of us but can't actually touch and are separated from. I do feel we're all probably eating different things than we would do ordinarily, there are things we can't get, we are speaking to friends and family and loved ones on Zoom and recording ourselves, possibly, but not to have that physical interaction I think is the biggest difficulty for me. It's just very different sitting with somebody. I live on my own so there isn't anybody else here. It makes me think of people that are in isolation all the time, whether by choice or not, and it makes me value our world and our worlds that we create for ourselves. Even though I love being on my own, I've built my own world obviously, as you know, with objects and plants and books and all sorts of strange things, but I think I underestimated, stupidly, how important people are.

JH: Yeah. I don't think that's stupid, though. I think it's that's one of the bright spots that people are experiencing during this. And also, I've also experienced that kind of shock at the almost surreal, vivid outside.

Does this astronaut research that you are doing tie in at all with the work we commissioned you to do at Fermynwoods?

SH: At first I hadn't connected the different bits up, but the more I'm thinking about the work that I am making for Fermynwoods the more I think it will come in.

JH: Just so our audience knows, Fermynwoods approached you last year about our new In Steps of Sundew programme which would involve you responding to multiple physical sites across Northamptonshire, including Fineshade Wood, Rockingham Castle, East Carlton Park and parts of Corby. We were so excited about commissioning you throughout the two years because your artistic output is wildly diverse. You've done drawing, collage, audio, performance, writing and so much much. I was really interested in what might happen if we just unleashed your brain on these places. I know you had a couple of meetings with staff at Rockingham Castle before the lockdown. I was wondering if you could talk about your approach to that site specifically and what about it inspired you.

SH: Going to Rockingham Castle was like being Alice in Wonderland. It's the most fantastic Norman Castle and has this amazingly rich history. On the top of a hill, if you look one way you can see the sun setting and then if you look the other way you can see the moon rising. It has this incredible vista of the sky, these beautiful planted gardens with yew hedges, and then this incredible space that has obviously changed and been adapted and built on and parts knocked down and other things over the top, and those layers of history.

I'm really interested, as a woman, about what we leave behind, especially in places that are perhaps carried through a kind of male lineage. So when we think of stately homes, the Royal Family, and places like that where it's often the wealth and status is carried through the man, and the possessions, and the decisions that have been made have often been made by men. So when I went to the castle, I specifically wanted to know about objects and belongings and things that had been left behind by the women who had lived there and what influence I suppose those women had on the daily feel of the castle, what they did in their lives but also how they potentially changed the people around them and what their legacy was.

What was brilliant was that because it's such an old space and everything has been so carefully kept and preserved and there's an amazing archive that I'll talk about in a minute, there are some fantastic women for me to look at. Two that I immediately gravitated towards, one being a woman called Lavinia Watson, who lived in the castle in the 1800s and was a confidante, with her husband Richard, of Charles Dickens and Dickens stayed with them often and wrote David Copperfield whilst we was staying with them and actually David Copperfield is dedicated to Richard and Lavinia. While Dickens was staying with them he would wander the gardens often in the evening, like we're doing now maybe after we've finished our work at home day we might go for a stroll before coming back and having our dinner, he would go for his early evening stroll through the gardens. There's one particular part of the gardens where there's this amazing yew topiary hedge that looks like elephants, a parade of elephants trooping across the Northamptonshire countryside, and Dickens thought that he saw a figure and then the figure wasn't there anymore. He wrote about this experience and actually turned this experience into a character for Bleak House. So from then on this part of the garden became known as the Ghost Walk. Lavinia wrote to Dickens a lot and they exchanged correspondence and there would be letters between them and for a start I'm interested in the actual physical letters, the physical ink on the paper and the identification of somebody just through their writing and seeing that it's a very very personal set of objects.

JH: And you had access to the archive, right, at Rockingham?

SG: The letters between Lavinia and Dickens are reproduced in the castle itself, so if you visit the castle you will see a case that has some of these letters in it, and then you can request access to the private archive, which I was really lucky to be let into. And the archive is kept by a wonderful man called Basil who is in his 80s and has worked in the castle for a think it's 27 years - forgive me Basil if I have got that wrong. Basil used to be a history teacher and knows everything there is to know really about the castle and the archive is not a huge room, maybe the size of my flat, but it's full of these cardboard boxes very neatly stacked on shelves and inside these boxes are treasures of the past. It looks kind of mundane, but then inside you have all these wonderful, wonderful things. Her letters, the original letters, are in the archive.

Then there's another woman called Florence who lived in the castle in the 1900s and in the 1930s after the first World War a lot of people, because so many people had lost people in the war, did go to mediums and spiritualists to try and talk to their husbands, sons, fathers and it was quite a big fashion. Florence actually went to a lot of seances and they were often held in the little church that's next to the castle and the local parson would also be at these seances, so it's quite an interesting space. So it's quite an interesting space, we have someone in that space who is a religious person but then we've also got people in that same space who potentially could come into conflict, but they don't seem to. What was wonderful is that Basil was able to show me these typed-up transcripts of the sessions, the seances, which just read like plays. They just, it's just like found art as it is. There's stage direction, there's different voices, they're laid out like plays, and the copies I saw are on waxed, thin pieces of translucent paper that kind of crackle when you hold them and they're very light. I said to Basil, I even like the paper that they're typed on. And Basil said to me, Well see these are the flimsy copies. I had never heard this term before and he told me that when they would typed up there would have been the original copy, the nice copy on the thick paper, and behind that you'd have your sheet of carbon paper, and behind that you'd have this thin, thin paper. So you would also have two copies, and the thin version was called the flimsy copy.

And with these things, accidental sentences and interrupted thoughts, and coincidences, I just hooked onto this phrase because the idea of copies, copies of things, is always very present in my work. I've got an MA in printmaking and the way I come into printmaking is through an idea of storytelling. The fact that, say we're at an amazing summer party. There's one party, but if there are 200 people at that party, everyone takes away with them a different copy of that party in themselves, And every time somebody talks about that party to somebody else, there is another copy of that party made, because every time we tell a story it changes slightly and it shifts. And so I imagine that we're taking prints with us in our heads through the world, and that's the way I came to printmaking. So this idea of the flimsy copy, the copy that is not the original but is in itself an object and is true and valid and is as real as the big, thick, lovely copy really resonated with me. And of course the flimsiness - the flimsiness of what is real and what we see our meaning being in our lives and how our existence is so fragile. Especially because I was thinking about night and in this context of the seance and the absence of something, whilst at the same time trying to recall a presence, it really made a connection for me. So I started to develop this work that I'm in the middle of at the moment, called *The Flimsy Copy*, and this is kind of the beginning of the process. I'm really thankful for the fact that I got to go to the Castle before lockdown...

JH: Me too!

SG:...because it means that I had got things to work with. A lot of the thinking is still going on in my head, which is why I'm slightly hesitant when I'm talking, because the way that I make work is that the work comes out of the process and out of the research with these little snippets of things that fit together so I don't know what the work is going to be and what the story is that I'm trying to tell through this material yet, only that there is such a rich wealth of information and material and perspectives and stories that could come into the work, that I think linked with the idea of space exploration, the night in a different way, something there but not there, probably will come back into the work.

Linked to that can I just also say that the work that I'm making, one of the pieces will be a kind of story show. I'm hoping that I'll be able to be in a room in the castle, probably in the evening, with an audience of people together with me, and perform a story which will include sound and images and I don't know what else at the moment. But thinking about the soundscape for this, we talked a little bit about audio already, I really wanted to try and make and learn to play the theremin, it obviously being an instrument that you don't touch, so again there is this division between the object and the person, but resonates a sound and an atmosphere through the presence of an interaction between the body and it. It was kind of making me think of the seance trumpets and the other paraphernalia that mediums may have used. What was wonderful is obviously you put me in touch with another fantastic Fermynwoods connection...

JH: It's Stuart Moore, who is currently one of our Education Coordinators. We run a programme with excluded students through the CE Academy, where we bring these students from the centre to our educational site in Fermyn Woods weekly and we have artists come in and lead workshops for them. So Stuart this school year, before the school year was ended prematurely, was one of those people who those students counted on seeing every week. He's also a tremendous artist who led a workshop for us - I think it was last year, does time exist anymore Sarah? - and the workshop was called Human Theremin. I programme the adult workshops at Fermynwoods and when I was talking to Stuart about what he was going to do and he said listen we're going to have a theremin but it's actually going to be two people operating this theremin so you're really playing the other person rather than playing the instrument. On the day while these adult people, some of us had never met each other, and we're doing little finger flutters at one another and making these weird high-pitched noises, I got so excited that I had to sit down. So I was so pleased to put your two minds together. When you said "Oh, I'm thinking of a theremin" I was like "I've got the artist for you". Sorry, I just wanted to put Stuart in context, go ahead!

SG: No, I'm really pleased that you did because he's a wonderful human being and Stuart and I have chatted since you've put us in touch. He sent me the pieces for a basic theremin for me to put together and start playing with but also went far beyond my initial hopes to suggest new ways of working and I'm hoping that together we'll hopefully be putting together the soundscape for The Flimsy Copy. That was another wonderful moment because who would have thought there would be someone already connected in some way that would be the perfect person to be part of this project? That collaging of people together fits in with the way that I work, too, so much of my work is about bringing fragments of things together and collaging them whether that is in sound or in postcard interventions or tapestry or whatever it is. So it was just the perfect connection, I think.

I wanted to quickly...I've been thinking a lot about different ways in. We've obviously talked about the material of the women in the house, but also going back to the outside and the sky and how we navigate the night sky, and particularly at Rockingham because of this wonderful vista it has, I've been thinking a lot about the weather. I have a little tiny book here called The Observer's Book of Weather, which is one of those small, pocket books that has a pale blue linen binding with the words embossed into it in a dark blue and it was printed in 1955. What's lovely about it is of course a lot of the science in it is no longer relevant or has been developed since but the language and the words that are used are incredibly evocative of an experience of the world and very poetic. For instance, at the same time as Florence was holding these seances in 1935, there is a passage in this book that says:

"In March 1935, blue rain was reported from the Shetland Isles after a heavy thunderstorm and was described as looking very much like blue black ink diluted with water. The explanation of this was given as being due to the particular atmospheric conditions in that locality, which at the time were highly polluted. These conditions were extremely unusual as there was an unstable air above a stable layer, combined with a mass of cold air previously moving in the opposite direction. Even in the early stages of the storm, the warm air was three quarters surrounded by cold air, the latter having arrived on the southeasterly wind."

And I think there's something in that writing again about the air and the surrounding of the air that makes a presence within it, a body, that is only air but just a different temperature from the other air. Often again when we think of mediums and spiritualists or ghost hunters, there's often a talk of temperature, of how suddenly the room has got very cold. I think there are really interesting connections between a scientific understanding of the world and an emotional understanding of the world and that if those things can be brought together into something then perhaps it gives us a fuller reading for where we are, and where we place ourselves. That might be an uncomfortable place, we might think it's nonsense, or we might not believe, or we might very heavily come down on one side of the other, but actually all of it is part of our experience. Especially now, there's lots of things coming into people's consciousness and subconsciousness that before perhaps they never even would have entertained.

JH: I think that leads quite nicely into the second audio work that you've been so generous to allow us to play as part of our podcast. Would you mind introducing it and just telling us a bit about it before we listen to it?

SG: This, I think, was the first proper (in inverted commas) audio work that I made. It was 1996. It was the first year of my BA and we were exploring the idea of aural and oral landscapes. I made a whole body of work with different writings and then I got different people to read and had a sort of performance night. This work that you are about to hear is called Black Night. I really wanted to make something that wasn't metaphorical in any way. I wanted the connections between the words to be just purely descriptive. There are a couple of anomalies in it, because I felt like it needed something to shift in it slightly towards the end. But as you will hear, we have "black night", "blue light" "pale face", "dark space". They're very, very simple words, and it's a chant, and these words are repeated over and over and over again. When I recorded it, I remember I think it was a weekend and I had gone into college and there was a friend who was there as well and he was a musician and he had a little 8-track with him. I said, Would you mind just experimenting and recording this thing with me? I recorded the main whisper that you will hear throughout, which is just over seven minutes, in one go. It's really hard to whisper something at the same tempo for seven minutes without stopping. And then he recorded two more tracks and I recorded another track on the top of that, and then we added sounds and other things in the background. Each of the tracks was recorded in its own channel, in one sitting, and I kind of popped it all together. It's a dark space, it's really designed to be played with the lights off, pretty loud. It starts really quiet but it does get loud towards the end. You will hear that it is a little bit fuzzy, a little bit hissy, because it's not a digital recording, it's an analogue recording from back in the day. I could have tidied it up and cleaned it, but I didn't to because part of the atmosphere of it is about the kind of air around it, like we're saying, so it becomes a kind of presence in the middle. It's about whatever you want it to be about. I hope you enjoy it. Put your headphones on, close your eyes, and breathe.

[sound piece Black Night by Sarah Gillet]

Black night

Blue light

Pale face

Dark space

Grey stone

White bone

Dull ground

Clear sound

Green mould

Slate road

Blind eye

Bleak sky

Brick mill

Stone sill

Deep hood

Burnt wood

Brown fog

Damp log

Marsh rain

Swamp crane

Red moth

Worn cloth

Bright dream

Trapped scream...

<repeated>

JH: Thank you for listening to the Fermynwoods Contemporary Art Podcast.

This episode received support from Arts Council England and the Kenneth Fund.

You can find Sarah Gillett on her website sarahgillett.com, and she's @inkystudio on Instagram and Twitter.

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Thanks for listening. Hope to see you back here soon.