

Transcript of the Fermynwoods Contemporary Art Podcast - Episode 2 Amy Lay-Pettifer, Alice Channer, and Bethan Lloyd Worthington

JESSICA HARBY

Hello and welcome to the Fermynwoods Contemporary Art Podcast. I'm Jessica Harby, Assistant Director at Fermynwoods.

Right now everyone is trying to understand an ever-changing experience while still in that experience.

Personally, I've found that I can talk about our online programming, which includes this podcast and exists only in the ether of ones and zeroes, as tangible and real. While our delayed in-person programming is more difficult to talk about without feeling I'm grasping at mist. These are art exhibitions planned for physical locations, consisting of real work by curators and artists, which exist in a state of indeterminate maybe. Are these ghost exhibitions? Hypothetical exhibitions? Exhibitions Which Are Not Yet? I'm still trying to find a concise term which feels right.

I'm grateful that this episode is an audio essay by writer and curator Amy Lay-Pettifer which addresses this particular state of indeterminate maybe. Amy's practice encompasses collaborative, site specific and non-book writing projects, which focus on voices, bodies, objects and how words become rituals that connect these things across time. The audio work she's made here encapsulates her experience of curating Pleasure Garden, an exhibition meant to open early May 2020 at Deene Park but that we now expect will take place in 2021, part of the similarly rescheduled Northamptonshire Surprise Year of Culture. The following audio programme includes discussion with and contributions by Pleasure Garden artists Alice Channer and Bethan Lloyd Worthington, who Amy will introduce.

And because it's important, and mentioned in the following discussion, I'd like to recognise the other collective moment of necessary change we are addressing as an organisation. We've released a statement that clearly lists what we've already put in place on issues of diversity and inclusion, and where we feel we can improve. Visit fermywoods.org to see our Statement of Anti-Racism and email us at info@fermywoods.org with your feedback.

A wealth of visuals and supplementary material for this podcast episode is also on our website. You can find a link in this episode's description.

Now. Here we go into the planned for, wished for.

AMY LAY-PETTIFER

Hello from the middle of things, where we have ended up. It's not the middle because we can see an end in sight, on a horizon that's equidistant from where we feel we began...but because it's all still in motion around us, in the tangible present.

We're in the midst of things. The misty mid point. The thick of it. Time growing outwards into the distance like a thicket, brambly and deep.

The plans we had are stalled. Back in May we were due to open *Pleasure Garden* - a group exhibition in the grounds of Deene Park, a 14th century manor house in rural Corby. Woven through the gardens, the show would feature work by artists including Alice Channer, Bethan Lloyd Worthington, Leyla Pillai and Dyveke Bredsdorff. It's now late June, and instead we're all at a distance, finding moments to still reach towards each other along the lines of things half written, half made, half formed.

This state of half-wayness is interesting to explore - not only because of the opportunity to witness things in the process of emerging or becoming, but also because of what it says about coming together. A midpoint suggests collaboration - a desire to make through cooperation. And I don't just mean between people.

The overarching theme for Fermynwoods' 2020 programme is extraction from the landscape. What's taken from it and how that affects the things living within it. While walking round Deene Park for the first time on a beautiful day in May 2019, it occurred to me how often we extract from the landscape in order to fuel our individual fantasies and desires. We adapt and construct within outdoor spaces; we occupy them in the name of escapism; we co-opt and collect fragments of the natural world in order to transform the domestic one. At Deene Park you can walk the perimeter of the house through a landscaped garden, smelling of rosemary and edged with topiaries. You can follow the river through sloping grassy banks that lead gently upwards to manicured lawns and beds of roses. And then onward through a series of enclosed spaces whose high walls are formed of dense green

shrub, with aspects across the river to the countryside beyond. There are follies in areas of pretty wilderness, accessed via desire paths trodden through an undergrowth of cow parsley - there's a tall round tower known as The Summer House, with glass doors that open onto a rockery.

It's all there to be enjoyed throughout the summer season, to be studied and delighted in - but I started to wonder what it would look like if the desires that shaped our landscape were those seeping from non-human forms. What friction would we feel when the landscape's wild, amorous agency met our own from the other direction - as an equal and opposite force. Could we investigate the melting point between bodies and elements, observe the new landscapes, textures and burning questions that might arise from that very specific chemistry.

Over the course of the next hour we will begin to do just that - and will be joined by other voices, specifically Alice Channer and Bethan Lloyd Worthington who were - at the point of stopping - in different stages of the process of making new work for this exhibition.

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In recent months I've been following the threads of an artist book called 'Reading Room - Meeting the Universe Halfway' by Harriet Plewis. It's an exploration of American physicist and theorist Karan Barad's 2007 book of the same name, in the form of a collaborative, expanded reading. Barad's is a dizzying text, weaving biology, geology, philosophy and physics to rework everything we understand about space and time, bodies and things.

Over 8 weeks Harriet and a group of collaborators explored the text, taking up residence in an empty office filled with indoor plants - the kind we all bring into our work spaces and living rooms to reduce stress and help concentration. The group read, listened, moved, wrote songs, they would draw the plants in an attempt to be 'alongside' them - a desire itself entwined with the aim of Barad's book, namely;

*to find ways of teaching our bodies new rhythms  
as we wondered, how you might hang out with*

*non-humans without wanting to get what they have.*

That's Harriet.

For Barad the world is made up of - *intra-actions* between nature and culture - she describes how things - objects, people, environments and moments - materially emerge through their entanglements with one another. Unlike an interaction, in which I'm me and you're you - fixed - defined beings protected by definitive boundaries that simply meet.

In the early pages of 'Reading Room' is a glossary of the major terms and ideas that occur in Meeting The Universe Halfway - one of these is Diffraction..

*Diffraction is what happens when a wave (e.g sound or light) passes through a narrow opening or by the edge of an object. It bends and spreads out; it diffracts. The wave forms meet each other and overlap/overlay.*

Just as tides change shape when they crash against a breakwater, or are pushed through the opening in a rock face, so experience and thinking begins to change shape as we enter into unknown spaces. In the process of making, we might rush headlong into the darkness of not yet knowing, of explorable deep time, heavy with questions - into the vicinity of risky, unplanned for upheaval. And we come out the other side quite changed.

Bethan Lloyd Worthington is an artist working in installation and objects, chiefly with ceramics, alongside drawing, textile, needlepoint and writing. Her work conjures connections to landscape and archeology, to the specificity and

continuation of ancient hand skills - all linked with rich layers of anecdotal story and evolving language.

In 2019 Bethan began an arts practice-based PhD in the Department of Geography of Royal Holloway, University of London. Her work there is centered on the excavation of Gully Cave - a middle to upper palaeolithic site of great significance located in Ebbor Gorge Somerset. It was described in 1977 as having a 'wide choked archway' - you can just picture the inevitable darkness beyond.

Let's follow Bethan as she explores the cave via the particular space of Deene Park's Gardens, which we visited together on a very cold Friday in early February...

### **BETHAN LLOYD WORTHINGTON**

The particular location Amy suggested for me is one of a series of garden 'rooms', called the Four Seasons garden. This is a large oval space, entered from the east or west through doorways in the thick hornbeam walls. To the south, wide, uneven stone steps go down to puddled (on the day of the site visit, ) grass, beyond which is the canal. To the north is a large arch, again in hornbeam hedge, supported with metal rods. There is a semi-circular stone seat under here, laced with bright green arrow-like moss. Before this seat is a small stone terrace, inset with three large millstones. Each quarter of the oval is bordered with flowers, and in the centre of the 'room', is a large urn with the feet of a griffin treading through ivy. With your back to the arch, there are four figures facing you, each around half life size, evenly arrayed with two either side of the steps. Each of these statues represents a season. I can hear gunshots.

We were met by the Head Gardener, Andrew Jones, who noted the presence of 'a bit more water than we wanted'. Andrew talked about volatility. I asked him whether he was noticing difference in the climate year on year, whether they were adapting the planting. He said they are more resilient than some similar stately gardens, because they grow hard, they let things self-seed and establish themselves where they're happy. He said that it's just all more volatile, which is not really a thing that you can plan for.

Standing in the Four Seasons garden, taking my first impressions, I related it back to Gully Cave. I began to overlay the two spaces, to match and mismatch them in my mind. There are the two entrances. An archway, under which a structure of metal poles. Shifting, untrustworthy steps, a containment of seasons.

The dense shelter of foliage breaking out to a view across water. A hearth was never found at the cave, but the central focal point of the garden burns with red planting in summer.

A couple of months before this invitation I read the reports on excavations at Gully Cave, prepared annually by Professor Danielle Schreve. On the Twelfth report, from 2018, I made the following notes -

“In Square C2, a pocket of clay was discovered (Figure 9), between -416cm below datum and - 441cm below datum, where it began to become more granular. The clay was very well sorted with some dark flecks, iron staining and heavily-weathered pebble-sized limestone clasts. Three sets of parallel samples were taken from the clay, for pollen, charcoal, beetles and sedimentology:”

In table 5 -

Pinus (Pine)

Alnus (Alder)

Salix (Willow)

Betula (Birch)

Corylus (Hazel)

Ilex (Holly)

Ericaceae (Heath/Heather)

Poaceae (Grasses)

Cyperaceae (Sedge)

Asteraceae (Aster/Daisy)

Artemisia (Asteraceae family, mugwort, wormwood, sagebrush)

Lactuceae (Asteraceae family, lettuces)

Caryophyllaceae (Pink/Carnation)

Filipendula (perennial herbaceous flowering e.g. meadowsweet and dropwort)

Rosaceae (Rose)

Ranunculaceae (Buttercup)

Rumex (Docks, Sorrels)

Charcoal

I had begun to think of this dugout square C2 as a walled garden in miniature. It resonated with me particularly, because the pollen preservation was enabled by clay, my own material, which had been excavated with seemingly gestural smears. The clay allows preservation by excluding oxygen from the deposits; where plant macrofossils survive in the surrounding grit, pollen only remains in the clay. This

is important for visions of paleoenvironments. Seeing the cave and perhaps this particular hydrophilic pocket of the cave, as a locus, a concentration of the surrounding landscape at a particular moment, you can begin to imagine it sucked it all in with animate purpose. It isn't that, of course. The wind blew, animals moved through their manors with leaves stuck to their hairy underbellies, some plant matter stuck and stayed somewhere and some did not. But the information that remains still has a radius; plant macrofossils evidence things that were quite nearby, pollen can come from much further away. Around the cave dense shrubbery and trees dropping heavier sticks, then the lighter contents of petals overlaps outwards to a more distant perimeter.

An idea I had was to replant the large central urn. In part because it niggled me - how to occupy a garden room with new works when it has already been designed, proportioned, given focal points and a showy middle? I wanted to grow a large, overblown display exploding out of a plant list laid down 30-40,000 years ago. The plants chosen could either be the ones closest to what those uncultivated plants might have been - an attempt to create something formal from wild old things - or they could be their most blousy, altered modern relations. It seemed either path would speak differently about the same things.

We proposed this work to Andrew, who discussed it with Lady Charlotte Brudenell, they both said no, the central urn should stay in reds and pinks, to contrast with the cool borders. We went back and suggested I could work in that colour palette, and that my intention would be to contrast strongly with existing planting, but the answer was still no.

But I had another thought, that grew up in the midst of this speculative bouquet. That petals from it, and pollen motes, would themselves again travel in the breeze and blow tumbling toward the steps between the seasons statues and the water beyond. They would catch on any sticky surface like confetti in a puddle after a party in the streets.

They might alight on the gloss of algae-ridden cobblestones or patches of scarified lawn. The seeping damp of the lower tier of grass might continue to rise up to hold them, forming bottomless pools in the floor of the four seasons chamber. Each statue might have its own, to reflect upon, Narcissus like. And, given this is a moment after a party, following a period of unsustainable excess, might they be staring into their own ejecta. And what would that look like, the vomit of the spirits of the seasons. Did you ever try to make perfume from rose petals as a

child? Did they rot? We had a neighbour thirty years ago who was an alcoholic, she would appear most days at the back door, which had a communal right of way. Someone was gossiping about her once and I remember they tried to pin down the aroma of her speech. You know when you have left flowers in a vase for far too long, the smell of that water.

## **AMY LAY-PETTIFER**

So where are we, something new emerging from a set of refusals, from the depths of a no - and something on the turn. Our attempts to smell rosy sweet - via petal dabs on the wrists - thwarted and become nasty and overripe. Like the blossoms are telling you to mind your own.

The lawns and flower beds at Deene are having a break from public gaze and I like this idea of Bethan's - of the party we can't attend raging anyway behind our backs. The persistence of non-human hedonistic will.

In the nearby summerhouse the plan was to install a textile work by the Danish artist Dyveke Bredsdorff titled, 'Lovers On Hamstead Heath'. The work is a long length of silk chiffon dyed blue, with pale white interruptions like burns from bleach. In fact they are cyanotypes - using chemicals and the light of the sun as a method of capturing the amorous entanglement of two bodies across moments in time.

The work radiates both heat and breeze - the encounter it depicts being not just between lovers, but between bodies, the earth, the sun and the afternoon - with something else distinct emerging from that mix. In the distant past, the summer house at Deene Park was a place for the conducting of illicit, extra-marital affairs - there's a room at the top of a winding stone stair with remnants of a romantic floral wallpaper - you blush to think what it's seen.

Bodies hot and sweaty. So warm and full of light from somewhere that you can use them as a conduit for imprinting images on fabric. These collisions forever change the molecules of the space around them - new atmospheres are generated. Which I suppose is the thrill of romance in the first place.

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On that same February day we asked to unlock the doors of the summer hours and open them wide, to imagine how Dyveke's work would look - an action that revealed an infestation of ladybirds in the crease of the door.

You can't plan for volatility - there's always something you don't expect or can't control. An absolute bolt from the blue.

There is a weather phenomena known as St Elmo's fire that manifests as a bright blue or violet glow from tall, sharply pointed structures such as masts or spires, but also on leaves and grass and sometimes the tips of cattle horns. Google it and you'll see the familiar fork of a lightning strike, bright rivulates against the blue - not unlike the passionate creases in Dyveke's work with their own specific charge.

Karen Barad has much to say about lightning and what it can teach us about the intentions and agency of the non-human world. The way the sky communicates with the ground in a stuttering chatter. Here's how Harriet noted it;

*lightning has a desire - it cruises and some of
earth sends up a signal: strike me, strike me here.
And lightning obliges. They meet halfway.*

In times past, holly trees were thought to have protective powers against lightning strikes and were often planted either side of a threshold to keep it safe. It's now known - without the need for superstition - that the spines on the scallops of holly leaves can act as mini lightning conductors - protecting the tree and anything nearby.

This thought crackles in my head as I think of the new work in process by Alice Channer for this exhibition. Alice is an artist who uses sculpture to stretch out, slow down and speed up industrial and post-industrial production processes. Her work makes these processes more visible to herself and to others, and attunes us to the multiple embodiments and dis embodiments involved.

For Deene Park Alice's work is a series of seven chromed limbs cast from brambles that push up with a precise determination from one of the manicured, close mown lawns, pervasive and unruly. But I'll let her, or it, tell you...

ALICE CHANNER

I am The Predator and this is the story of my multiple births.

My 7 brittle, mirrored limbs grew in the industrial estates at the edge of my city. These are the places where the thing I call 'I' works and lives, and where parts of my work are extracted. I picked brambles to make the castings for 'Predator' in June and July 2019 near train tracks in South East London. Deep in the thorny thickets there, balancing on one leg with a blade and gloves, always half a step away from a dogshit. Down there I feel thorns being born, ripping through my red and green stems like shark fins. My sharp, fresh bramble thorns, snapping against fingers-nailed, as soft endoskeletal arms reach and stretch.

I am The Predator. I wanted these materials so much: for what they could teach me about resilience and vulnerability. I am The Predator and every year I lick upwards again and again from unnoticed ground, stretching my barbed and elongated tongues. Out of ground zero, through metal security fences, and in spite of everything. Overhead, a low flying helicopter, an airborne industrial Predator characteristic of this part of South East London since mid-March 2020

At White Eagle Foundry in Hurstpierpoint, I was buried in an urn of Silica Sand and emerged reborn in a body of extracted aluminium. I am The Predator, and at Fox Plating in Lower Sydenham I breached amidst a virus from deep tanks of chromium trioxide and sulphuric acid. My skin is now a bubbling mirrored abject armour. At Joe Waller Fabrications in Catford, I was given needle sharp aluminium roots sliced from sections.

I am The Predator and I am ready to return to the earth.

AMY LAY-PETTIFER

In a text accompanying Alice's 2019 exhibition *Man Made*, Noam Segal reminds us about the conducting effects of metal, a material that appears often in highly shiny and alluring form in Alice work, as it does in *The Predator*. She writes;

“Metal is defined by its self-transformations and abilities to connect, re-shape, and reformulate other objects.”

The chromed, thorny brambles stand now as lightning conductors in my mind - ready to receive a charge and to reformulate both us and the space around them, through encounter.

Petals as ejecta, bright thorns, molten flesh, the volatile agencies of blooms with bite - all this reminded me too of Sarah Kane's difficult to swallow play *Cleansed* from 1998. Throughout it the extreme tenderness and vulnerability of bodies collides with violent friction against the pervasiveness of nature. At one point Kane write's - among other seemingly impossible stage directions - that a carpet of yellow daffodils should burst forth suddenly to cover the entire stage.

In the original production they did it by tumbling hundreds of plastic flowers from a suspended trough. Stiff wires had been threaded through the centre of each stem - turning them into rigid, sharp, directional darts.

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Earlier this week, I spoke to Alice and Bethan to hear more about the emerging of ideas from bare earth, the bloom that comes from working with and alongside materials - of meeting them halfway. Here's our conversation which begins with a question about process...

### **ALICE CHANNER / BETHAN LLOYD WORTHINGTON / AMY LAY-PETTIFER**

**AC:** Well, I suppose the last few years I've been thinking that process...I've had some big revelations about process. I think I didn't realise for a long time how important it was, and that's partly because I think there still isn't a lot of language for it - I didn't have one and I still think there isn't a collective one, and I think that's what makes it really interesting. A few years ago I read a quote by the philosopher Rosi Braidotti who said, 'if the only constant at the dawn of the third millennium is change, then the challenge lies in thinking about processes rather than concepts.' And that was one of those moments when this bomb! Or these little bombs started going off in my head and have been ever since. And it seemed

to relate to big changes in art - moving away from language and semiotics and towards processes and materials that I could feel when I was at art school - which was over a decade ago - but I think those changes are still happening, they're happening as a society as well. I guess that in this particular moment we're all very aware of the only constant being change - this big revolutionary change but also these tiny molecular changes that can happen at the level of a virus that we can't see, that changes everything.

So that quote made me start thinking about process and, in my own work I've been describing it, to myself and to others the last few years, as a kind of 21st century process art. And when we think about process art I think we still think of someone like Lynda Benglis - who's an incredible artist and someone who's very important for me - but still in her work, the process comes from an explicitly human body. In a Lynda Benglis 'pour' piece with material that's poured on the floor, we still imagine the quite normative human body expressing that action of pouring. And what I'm really interested in doing in my work is expanding beyond that singular human body - because I think authorship is multiple. So that's how I've been approaching process - how can I show through my work that processes are authored on many different levels and by many different things?

**BLW:** Process for me has mutated in the way I understand it over the past 10 or so years. I came out of a really materials and technique based education, so very much a studio craft style of teaching. And so process in those contexts was very much *how do you physically make this thing? How do you go from a clay blank to a plaster mould to this* - a very tight way of looking at things. I've certainly opened that up for myself, and process has expanded to be... actually often making takes up a very small amount of my time now. Process is a kind of grasping and collecting of things that often goes on for years, and then the act of making is so quick it's almost violent. But then again, I'll loop back on myself and go back into a work with much more time consuming techniques and I'll almost be in a completely different state myself at that point - so there's definitely a looping back and a calling back.

And this is something I'm thinking about a lot at the moment because I'm trying to write about process, I'm trying to write about it in the context of being in a department with paleontologists and climate scientists, people who go about things in a very different way. And so I'm noticing that the ordering of my process is very different than how they would go about it. I'm sort of starting somewhere and going back and then coming forward again - which is interesting to me

particularly in the context of thinking about time. The particular environment that I'm studying is a cave that contains evidence of at least the past 50,000 years, so there's a real specificity in the things that are coming out of that, but then also this expansiveness, and trying to inhibit all of those things at once, through this process. I think the two things are mirroring each other in some ways, like the excavation and my understanding of that place and site.

**ALP:** I think the presence of time in both your practices is very important and is one of the processes that is made very evident. I think that's interesting what you say Bethan about the contrast between what you described as this immediate, almost violent moment of making that's quite instantaneous, contrasted with all of these thousands of layers of deep time that are folded into the work. Which I think is really true of you as well Alice - even in a visual sense there is this aesthetic of folding and pleating and creating layers...

**AC:** Yeah definitely, just in terms of surface, every work that I make has a surface that I would describe as *pleated*. And what I mean by that is that the surfaces are never smooth or continent. And in a lot of sculpture, especially monumental cast metal sculpture, you generally have a smooth continent surface that looks solid. But actually a lot of the statues that are being toppled at this incredible moment are hollow, they are not solid bodies, they've been cast in sections from quite a thin skin actually, and then welded together. And when I found out monumental casting was made in that way it was a very liberating moment for me.

But, I've actually got some of the parts of *The Predator* with me, because I wanted them to be with us! So maybe we can talk about the surface while looking at it. So, going back to the first question you asked about process, if we look at the surface of this one of the seven limbs that make up *The Predator*, it's pleated, and what I mean by that is that it's textured, but also there's so much folded into it. Every stage of its process from it growing as a plant, as a bramble, through to it being cast, through to it then being chromed, is folded into its surface. We can see that it's all held there.

**ALP:** And also it's interesting that even though it's held there in that particular moment, there's also the suggestion that there's further for it to go, maybe that it's not at a stasis point in its life as an object. Again, that's something that I really see in both of your work is that even if you hold one of these objects, if you are static, there is a sense that something is kind of *happening*, as you're looking at them... that they're on their way to becoming something else. And there are other

registers, temporal registers or other perspectives that it's possible to inhabit through these objects, to see the world somewhat differently.

**AC:** Yeah. I suppose the truth of that as well as in process - all there is is process - processes of moving and becoming. Some of the reading I've been doing this month is of Lynn Margulis the evolutionary microbiologist, especially this book *What Is Life?* She writes it with her son Dorion Sagan and they try to define again and again and again, *what is life*, and each time their definition of it changes because it's always becoming. It's something continually generated by multiple bodies in a surface. She means the surface of the planet but I hope this is within the surface of this limb which I'm holding up to the screen to you now which makes up part of *The Predator*.

**BLW:** I love the sense of it sort of erupting out of itself, it's going beyond the energy of that bramble which is a very forceful energy in and of itself. It's becoming more unpredictable and starting to look almost geological around the edges. It's a really powerful, shiny, strong, slightly scary thing. I love it. I think about it every time I'm weeding in my garden now, having seen it pressed into the lawn in the stately home garden. It's the thing that keeps coming back to me now as I'm pulling them out.

**AC:** They're so resilient and that's one of the reasons I wanted to work with them as materials. I wanted to be around that and learn. What you are describing -for everybody who can't see what we can see - what Bethan was describing was this leak or bloom at the edge of the cast which is where the aluminium has forced its way out of the original form during the casting process. This is something that's a really important part of the final cast.

**BLW:** I think it's the texture, I'm not sure what it is that the metal is bleeding out into when it's cast. Is it sand?

**AC:** Yeah, it's sand.

**BLW:** It's got that granular texture to it where it's becoming something else.

**AC:** Yeah, that's the texture of sand you can see. It's quite abject as well. It's really important to bring that to this shiny surface which would otherwise be very smooth and continent. The very authoritative, industrial surfaces are supposed to completely envelop. You're not supposed to be able to breathe through them,

they're supposed to make something completely whole and continent and seamless. I wanted there to be these ruptures. But I think that with this sculpture you have to get really close to see them. Consistently in sculpture the small scale is ignored, but you have to get close to see this. This has been the other fascinating thing about Lynn Margulis because she's talking all the time about microbiology and bacteria, things we have to go in really close to look at.

**BLW:** Absolutely. There's a great line from Elizabeth Bishop about *why can't we have some small things*. I wish I could remember it exactly but it's something that's been playing on my mind. Especially at the moment because large things don't feel possible. At the moment, I don't have somewhere to fabricate large things so I'm trying to pull everything right down into what I can hold in my hands and try and make something beautiful and something powerful out of that without relying on huge spatial dynamics.

**ALP:** Obviously we're talking about landscape in a wider sense in relation to this programme, the fact that we're making this exhibition that's going to exist out of doors and in landscape, and this need or interest in closer looking or in dealing with the landscape in fragments, in smaller sections. Bethan, I was thinking about your works that you've made in the past that are these clods of earth that have been cut out and rendered in clay, a kind of a tendency to demarcate space as if you mark out an area on an archeological dig and then that's where you investigate. I think that connects to what you've got in process for Deene Park and what you've started to make. Which actually also, despite being quite contained, has a similarity to this exploding quality of Alice's bramble. There's this kind of movement outside of this very particular little square area that could be a tile or a paving stone or something of that nature. Perhaps you could talk a little about that.

**BLW:** There's definitely a relationship between those two works. The one that you reference is called *She will be fine on there. Forever*. It came from thinking about the nature of plinths and their fixedness and the way that historic porcelain figures are often painted with this very traditional, literal design on the base as though the figure is really standing on a chunk of earth or turf. There might be flowers falling down a rock face, or they're standing on something that's green on the top and brown at the sides as if it's been lifted out. I enjoyed that as a thought but also the scale of that piece, it has marks in it where my own feet stand, so it's kind of demarcating a chunk of space but really for me to stand. I think that I very much had a sense of me being stuck in space and almost being an observer of a wider

perimeter around me. But also perhaps being on a walk once where I hadn't told anyone where I was going and having to crush across this boggy marshland and getting halfway across and thinking, *This is how bog bodies happen. I'm entering into a potential state of permanence here.* So it's kind of marking that point.

I think with the work that is stalled but that I am still very much thinking about for Deene Park, perhaps something like the reverse is going on. So it's maybe not maybe spaces that are for standing and looking out but they are gathering things in. Almost in the way that this cave that I'm studying is a receptacle for a wider landscape. It contains pollen and animal bones and all of these things that have come to it from other places. These patches in the lawn of Deene Park almost are these sticky surfaces that catch petals and pollen and things that might have drifted in from the borders or from other places of imagining. There definitely is a connection between those two things.

I was also thinking about another work that I made that was called *Pickling the seeds of spring*. It was the response to a poem by Jack Underwood which contained the line "pickling the seeds of spring". That whole poem had such a strong sense of regret about it. It wasn't placed anywhere specific, but it was this sense that things were wrong and things were tumbling and falling and something had happened that wasn't quite right. That line pickling the seeds of spring sounded like a saying to me. It sounded like something that has come to us from a previous time, but I don't think it actually is. I've searched for it, I'm not 100% sure. But that sense of either stifling something before it's had a chance to grow or a sense of latency where something might still come back into fruition, or at least into use, having been stored in a substance for that amount of time.

**ALP:** I thought it was interesting that you mentioned melancholy. Talking about working within this particular space that is so geared towards enjoyment of landscape and of the natural world, and this perusing of flowerbeds and scent and vista, and all of these things which are so geared towards giving us pleasure of some description. And yet I think a lot of what's going on in these works is there's a darker side to all of it which is about upturning this human exceptional hierarchy where we're finding ourselves very vulnerable and very limited in a way, becoming very aware of boundaries that we have that the natural world that we co-opt and gather for our own enjoyment is not subject to. I think it's interesting in this moment of stopping of everything, what can move, what is in motion, where that persistence is located. And also, Alice, your work as you alluded to earlier on, there's an aggressive retaliation almost. It's titled *The Predator* so there

is that going on, that it isn't about something occurring in a garden which is for us to lay back and be passive about. It's coming for us.

**AC:** There's a little bit of playful irony in the title because I am thinking about scale and *The Predator* the sculpture when it's installed will be eight metres long. So it's kind of monumental in one dimension but in its other dimension, it's only a few centimetres wide and its height would come up to about 70cm, so average-ish, standing-ish human knee height. So I'm thinking about how it's a slightly ironic title to make me and everybody else think about scale. But I suppose the gardens that the work was made for *are* dangerous, and they're *not* natural, and they exist because of violent processes of colonialism - extraction and the accumulation of wealth. I made this sculpture for them and titled it *The Predator* as a way of, on my own terms, trying to make that visible. I suppose I'm also really aware that I'm still really uncomfortable with the word *natural* to describe certain materials. I think I always will be. Every time I bring a material that was living into an industrial process, in order to make this work these sections of bramble were cut, extracted, and they're parts of bodies. I imagine them as parts of bodies, and I'm putting them into these very beautiful but also violent processes. For me, that brings a kind of level of emotion to the work. It speaks both about the resilience but also about their vulnerability. Living bodies cannot go into a chroming tank or a foundry casting process. They cannot have sharp aluminium roots drilled into their feet so that they can be rooted permanently into the earth. It's not possible.

It's not my job to be an expert about process. It is my job to say *how does this feel*, and that's what I'm trying to do, both about the location and the way that the work is made.

**ALP:** There's a really great quote that I've found in this Karen Barad text that I've been reading a lot in relation to this exhibition and thinking about things that link all of this together. She talks about the idea of anthropomorphising things, which obviously we do a lot and that becomes so much a part of the way we understand everything, by bringing it into our own bodies so we're imagining it within our own bodies. And even though there is somewhat of an issue of hierarchy there in terms of who gets to imagine themselves in what direction that's happening, she says:

"I'm deeply invested in anthropomorphising as an intervention for shaking loose the crusty, toxic scales of anthropocentrism, where the human in its exceptional way of being gets to hold all the goodies like agency,

intentionality, feeling, pain, empathy, language and consciousness, and imagination."

**BLW:** It's definitely something that I feel like I'm hovering on the brink of working out a position on all of that. I think particularly because this cave that I'm spending almost all my time thinking about, initially when they started to excavate it they did think that it was likely that there would be early human remains in there, or at least more signs of early human remains, because there have been in other similar caves nearby. There are some really famous ones. But actually they found almost nothing. They found two tiny little flint flakes, just outside the cave. And that's almost everything. So this is a space now which is only inhabited, at least in my imagination of what I'm capable of getting hold of, by animals and by plants. So it's a place where I almost have no business being. I have no way of understanding it. So I'm noticing the things that I'm bringing to it about my understanding of what inhabitation means, and almost being very literal about that, thinking about very domestic spaces in the context of this entirely non-human space. It's interesting being there with a team, the amount of very ordinary human activity that goes on alongside of this - people are having tea breaks, people are setting up a table, singing happy birthday, somebody's brought a cake, people are dressing and undressing and moving buckets around and moving ladders around, and organising this space in a very human way, in a very now way. But the space, the whole space almost has nothing to do with us. I do find that really interesting. In terms of approaches to writing about place and about nature as well, that tone is really important. It's crucial. Whether you're approaching it as somebody who is striding out and having epiphanies, or what your mental interactions are with the plants and animals you are coming across, whether you're feeling like they're noticing you, communicating with you, whether you're influencing them. It's a difficult and fraught one, especially as we're definitely understanding a lot more about the autonomy of plants and the intentionality of the way that plant behaviour happens, whether we can call that a behaviour at all.

**ALP:** I suppose it's interesting in the sense that so much of our fascination is to do with this sense of knowing and not knowing, and what we can and can't see. I was wondering how much you think about what you can't easily see or know in the areas that you're working in, and how much, when you've got to the end of the process of making, you want to keep hidden. Perhaps a complete revealing and elucidation isn't necessarily what's being aimed for.

**AC:** I think I'm quite an abstract thinker. I think also we've talked a lot about process, but my work is a lot about form. Form is very hard to speak about. I wonder whether it's not so much a case of things that things are said or evident, it's just that they're making themselves seen on a different register, for example through form. And I'm really interested in our capacity to stretch ourselves, out beyond what we think we are, what we think we know. What I really hope is that encounters with sculpture in its broadest possible sense can help us to do that, to go far beyond our own bodies, far beyond where we think we might be able to.

**ALP:** That's something that I think of so strongly when I think about your work, this feeling of expansiveness. You talked about scale in relation to sculpture and how this notion of things being monolithic is prized or common, whereas your work often has a horizontality to it but there's a sense of something dispersing and moving outwards. Also a sensation of encountering things which are, although they contain recognisable elements in them, whether that be natural (sorry using that word natural again), these organic forms like shells and fossils and mushroom forms or bones, there is something else happening beyond that which brings us into a place that is more alien. These might be alien bodies and there's a sense when looking at them that one thing you're not sure of is what the boundary is and what their capability for expansion is. In an encounter with your work, I always feel a sense that's the thing that you are not allowed to know, what potential for movement is within the work that you make.

I feel that very much with you too, Bethan. There is so much intimacy in your work and in the encounter with your work, there's a real sense of being drawn into a particular space that you think *this sort of feels like somewhere I could live*. You talked earlier on about this collapsing spaces into each other, a garden space within a cave within a room, and how there's a certain sense of domestic boundary that we might recognise in terms of scale, but that when you are actually face to face with those things something is slightly off or off kilter to the point where your relationship to the knowledge of that thing is out of joint.

**BLW:** Yeah, I hope that is the case, thank you. In terms of knowing and not knowing, I'm definitely comparable with uncertainty for at least a long way through the process. I like to keep a sense of holding things in the air together. I think the writer Jenny Offill says something along the lines of, *finding things that have a tiny charge or a magnetic quality between them and seeing where they sit together*.

I think about that a lot in relation to the way that I gather information and facts and various notions, sort of hoarding these things in relation to making a work. And then the actual work is a temporary clustering or fixing of those things. Once that's fixed, things dissipate and move around again and become something else next time.

I definitely do keep returning to these slightly familiar, slightly domestic forms. I think the work that probably does that most clearly is *Showcave*, which was another one from about three years ago. It's a sconce essentially, it's green and it uses marbled slipware, a ceramic technique that mimics a geological technique. It's very much two things at once. It's a dish or a sconce that is a functional object on the wall, and you can light a candle in it and use it, but if you slightly blur your eyes it becomes a portal or the mouth of a cave. You can see through this ceramic technique a sense of depth and a sense of forms going off into the darkness and this candle is leading you through. That sense of inside and outside happening at once is really important to me as something I keep coming back to.

**ALP:** It's interesting to think of this idea of friction or encounters with work or the ways of making. Are there moments of that wrong foots you or when there's a sense that can't be planned for?

**BLW:** Definitely. Especially at the moment. Who knew things were going to be this volatile?

I definitely create situations where it happens. I was thinking about ceramics specifically. I've been studying this for twenty years, I know how it functions, I know how this stuff works. And yet still I will sometimes make an object and I will try and create this marbling technique by pouring this liquid stuff over it before it's dry or before it's fired, and it will collapse and I'll have to make the thing again. There's often a knife edge that is part self-sabotage but also part wanting the thing to feel like I'm not quite in control of it. Then there are the parts of the process where perhaps I'm really in control, like I'm mimicking botanical painting from 18th century chinaware for example, and then I'm doing something much slower and much more careful. But those moments of volatility are really important.

**AC:** I felt holding up this part of *The Predator* that we were discussing earlier, I knew that these casts because I made a test run would be a little bit rough. My worry was that I wouldn't get any of the thorns. But I didn't actually, some of

them you can see where they've been dragged out almost like a kind of a blur was cast into the metal where they were dragged out of the sand.

Bethan, you were talking about setting up a situation in which that could happen, which I think is really skilful. That's different from saying *Oh I'm just going to rrrrrrrrr*, it's getting to a point where you know enough to know what to put into place, plan everything in order for there to be a margin in which something could happen. It's controlled chance. I knew enough about how I wanted this to look. Also, to go back to your point Amy about Karen Barad and processes of becoming *with* materials and forms and processes, what's important I think in a lot of my work and I become more and more aware of this over time, is working with and having conversations with materials, processes and also the people that are experts in them over time. The pleaters that I work with who pleat fabric professionally, I've been working with them now for over fifteen years, and out of these conversations always more is drawn. Always. It's knowing enough in order to leave a gap in order for this bloom to happen. You have to know where to leave the gap and where the gap is.

**ALP:** Another way that Karen Barad describes it is this idea of drilling a hole into it and allowing air to circulate, that's how she describes it. There's a rigidity that has to be breached in order to allow stuff to breathe, basically. There's then space for a response to come.

**BLW:** There's something about control perhaps as well. I do sometimes plan in order to make space for things like that to happen, for those gaps to happen and things to bloom in certain unexpected ways. But also a lot of the time there are those points in a making process where it's happening right now or it's not happening at all, like a certain angle of pouring something over something, or building something so that its balance is exactly where you want it to. It's I suppose being able to make those decisions in the moment, because you've only got that moment to make that decision. I'm not quite sure what it is I'm calling on in those moments, how much of it is that kind of haptic knowledge, how much of it is pushing forward and scaring myself. Those are some of the most rewarding moments where you're almost saving something on the brink of something, or adjusting something, and then pulling back and stopping.

**AC:** Amy, when you were just talking about Karen Barad and this moment when you described her using these words "drilling a hole" - that to me is just so exciting, the idea that a form might be full of holes. *The Predator* is a single

sculpture, it's a single finished form, and when it's installed that is the way that it will always be installed in the future. It's a single thing but it's made up of seven parts so it has quite big holes in it. Not only that but the surfaces of it are kind of pleated, they're full of potentials for surfaces coming apart or being incontinent. That to me is just so, so exciting, the energy that that releases.

### **AMY LAY-PETTIFER**

Drilling a hole in it and allowing some air to circulate. These gaps - of waiting and not yet knowing - are what we have and we have to make the most of them. As of this week we know for certain that our activities are definitely on pause, at least until next year. So we'll wait, investigate the gaps in between, the dug up hunks of earth and clay, the treacherous bits along railway tracks that edge up the sides of their bridges, the unfolding days and weeks of uncertain time, the smell of a voice.

And we'll see what there is to learn. The last word on this I'll give to Karen Barad, via Harriet via the writer Alice Fulton, who's poem 'Cascade Experiment' is a catalyst - a bold lightning strike that begins Meeting The Universe Halfway - she writes....

*Nothing will unfold for us unless we move  
towards what looks to us like nothing.*

### **JESSICA HARBY**

Thank you for listening to the Fermynwoods Contemporary Art Podcast.

This episode received support from Arts Council England and the Kenneth Fund and was produced by Amy Lay-Pettifer. Thanks to Alice Channer and Bethan Lloyd Worthington, as well as Harriet Plewis and all the participating artists.

I'm happy to say that our next podcast episode will be an original commissioned sound piece by Leyla Pillai, a third artist from Pleasure Garden, this exhibition that is not yet.

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