

The Difference a Day Makes
Interview with Clare Woods by Jackie Haliday
A Tree A Rock a Cloud Exhibition Catalogue 2014

“Anxiety and fear are in the background of everything I do...I think that’s what keeps me going there’s always a fear. There’s always a fear of something.”

A fluidity and confidence of brushstroke, a sense of rapidity and seemingly disparate subject matter are my first impressions of Clare Woods’ new paintings destined for her forthcoming exhibition *A Tree A Rock A Cloud* at the Oriel Davies Gallery. From the bunion specialist, silent German bombs, Eduardo Paolozzi wax heads, First World War bandage manuals, a bird’s nest, dismembered statues, Louise Bourgeois, 7/7 London bombings to cuckoo feeding patterns, the net for her source material for this new body of work appears widely flung. It’s a departure from earlier paintings where Clare worked from photographs she had taken, in particular the landscape at night, and allows as she puts it ‘a detachment from the image’. What it also seems to be allowing in these intimately-scaled paintings is a shorthand that appears to be emerging as Clare filters seamlessly through these origins of inspiration. While the paintings feel resolved and solid there is also a glimmer of uncertainty, a teetering on failure, an anxiety and tension that is ultimately what holds them together and ensures their success.

“I’ve realised it’s not static. Everything you look at or observe affects you and feeds the next thing...I’m sure as things change it will become more contained again and it will come to a point where it’s not moving so fast and I’ll develop within those boundaries but at the moment it’s changing every day.”

Through the course of the day Clare and I spent together in her studio I recorded our conversation as she painted sausages (for the collective *Palace Project*) and talked me through her current work. Below is an account showing a fascinating thread where she links the seemingly incongruous together, the tangible with the intangible, the solid with the ephemeral; a tree, a rock, a cloud.

It started off I was going out at night taking photographs in the dark. It was a way of detaching myself from the subject matter I was in there feeling the fear taking the photographs and running off. I felt like I needed that whole rounded experience to know what the landscape looked like, what it smelt like, the colours, to actually feel it. So I could put that into the paintings. Because when you look at those massive works (*The Intended, Mistaken Point*), you’re in them. I needed to experience what I was going to paint. I didn’t want to be a voyeur, going through books and taking pictures and painting other peoples’ experiences. I felt like for it to be true I needed to feel it, otherwise it just didn’t work.

I need it to come from a reality. I need all the work to start from an image. It has to start from something that's grounded in a reality but I like the idea of abstraction and the possibilities of abstraction. There are endless possibilities of what you can do if something's abstract so it has to balance between those two points for me to work really. The image is always highly edited quite early on because of the way I take a photograph, draw it and redraw it. Then it's traced on and then it's cut so the image goes through quite a few processes, which allows details to be lost as I go along. I quite like that editing of detail.

Around 1996 the only way I could describe that point in the paintings was through films – the Gothic horror film, the '70s type of film always based in the landscape so you've got a house in a residential area but there's always that view into the landscape. There's a family and they live in this domestic setting and everything's perfect and then there's just one tiny little point where you think, hang on. There's a crack. It's either the relationship of the parents or it's something in the landscape that changes or it's the weather. Something's not quite right and it's revealed in a second and it's where those two points meet. Where you've got the safe domestic loveliness of home and then you've got horror and death and fear and where those two join. It's that point where a horror film tips and I'm interested in where the two poles meet.

It's almost like I had to make the paintings to work out how to use the images. The stone images that I started painting for the Hepworth (*The Unquiet Head*, Hepworth Wakefield Exhibition, 2011), the small pictures and the Avebury stones, I've had images of these for about fifteen years but I couldn't work out how to actually use them. It was this process of going through all this other stuff to work out how to actually use these images that I've been saving for so long.

At the moment, as source material, there are some images that are mine of family which kept bringing me back to imagery of heads and the next lot of pictures that I'd had for ages were these London bombing pictures; the woman with the white mask. I'd had these for a long time and I couldn't do anything with them so they sat for years and it's only recently that I've actually been able to do anything with them.

There are lots of these photographs that I've collected from years ago. This one is in Berlin from the first time I went, this statue has had its head and legs blown off. I couldn't quite work out how I could use it. Then I started making these connections between the sculptural images I was collecting. I wanted to paint how it was constructed. I studied sculpture and I think about things very three dimensionally although I can't make sculpture.

I keep coming back to these heads and also looking at mummies and wrapping and thinking about constraining. I've been looking at Louise Bourgeois a lot and

Phyllida Barlow and the idea of constructing something three dimensional out of fabric, something that's flat and the tension that you get from stitching a piece of fabric together and stuffing it. Then there's Paolozzi. I was looking at Paolozzi loads, at the wax heads. Where he'd cast sheets of flat wax and then shape them together with hot knives.

I'm a totally frustrated sculptor and I'm never going to make sculpture but it was using the oil (on aluminium) and being able to press and have control over pressure and opaqueness that you can't have with gloss because it's either on or off. It's a cover. The red on the background (**Silent Suzan 2014**) is all the same colour but there are different weights, tension and pressing of oil paint. Gloss will just find its own level and disappear, it doesn't retain the stroke, it's like being a sculptor, you're covering something, you're making a sculpture and you're covering it. Whereas this (**Silent Suzan 2014**) is very much about brush mark and the pressure so that what I've found is the concept and the production of the materials are now much closer.

I think the anxiety and tension about wanting to make an object is what makes a successful painting. I need that tension in the paintings for the paintings to work.

In the past I would go out and take these photographs and it was all about fear and then I'd come back and paint it and it was very separate. Whereas now I really feel like I'm caught up in the whole thing and it's not separate anymore. I really got involved in it (paint/painting?) and I didn't have that detachment that I had with this (gloss). Now it's allowing this weaving of painting background becomes foreground. It's allowing a brush mark to weave behind.

Domestic Dilemma 2014. Why I started painting the nest is because I just thought they were the ultimate sculpture. The way a nest is constructed is like two objects working together so the branch or ledge is a plinth and the bird builds this object but the object's built from inside so it's a form. It's the internal form that's important and outside really doesn't matter so you see them with all sorts of bits of old rubbish sticking out of them but the inside's perfect. I like that placement of object and the kind of concept that the innards are perfect so it doesn't matter what the outside looks like. Obviously there are loads of other connotations about the home but it really is very much about a formal thing of two objects sitting together quite nicely.

For these (**Fanny 2014 and Annie 2014**) I was looking at a lot of Giacometti and Bacon and this whole idea of a plinth or a frame to contain an image. When you think about Bacon, there are certain paintings where he paints a space frame which almost contains this abstract line which gives it a positioning or suddenly puts it into place. Then I was looking at these hanging Giacometti sculptures and thinking

about containment and line. In sculpture the line has to work whereas in painting the line can be totally wrong and be anywhere you want.

There are three layers to **Annie**. The shadows work really well for me because originally they weren't even meant to be shadows they were just a mirror of what was happening in the foreground. Part of the background becomes like an extended ear. There is the face and the ears and then there is an extension hanging down. You've got the back shadow and then you've got this line that goes behind the back shadow and the foot's tangled up in that as well so it's all wrong. **Annie** does all the bits that I wanted it to do. You have this smooth background and then you have this quite rough over-painting.

For this (**Little Contented Lane 2014**), I was still looking at landscape but I knew I very specifically wanted pictures of trenches. Some years earlier I had been looking at Nash and reading his accounts and letters he sent back to his wife, talking about what the trenches looked like so he was talking about them physically as colours and images. Actually having someone else's account of something was really interesting, a visual account of a landscape and that's when I thought I want to detach myself from this so I'm not making the decisions. The photograph already exists. It's (**Little Contented Lane 2014**) been difficult to make it work but it's mostly background and what I wanted to do was see how you could form a background and put very few stencils on top to get perspective or to get shape. It's a slow-burn. It wasn't actually about painting the figure. That's why it's just the highlights and ultimately, although now I'm not overtly painting landscapes, there's the fear and quietness and muteness of the landscape, all those stories it holds and all those things from the past retained in the land that is still really important. I just don't feel it needs to be as obvious as before, which comes with maturity. It's about how you feel. It's not the heightened, wired fear of *Blair Witch Project* that it was. In the past it was about direct fear. You go to out in the dark somewhere at night and photograph the landscape.

My fears now are more about the future and more long-term. You worry about your children and friends and how you can't predict anything. That's why I find the First World War so shocking because there was a whole generation that had no control on their future.

I've always been affected by the First World War. My Nan lost two brothers when she was ten and she used to knit socks for the soldiers at school and there's lot of stories and those are the sorts of stories I used to hear as a kid a lot. A lot of war stories. My dad used to talk about the war a lot when he was a kid and certain stories stick in my head about horrific things that happened to his friends. And I always used to think how do people function on a daily basis and have babies and

function with all that shit going on. How come during the war people were born and people got married. How come people could think about anything apart from surviving? It strips everything away and it brings you back to your basics about what you are as a human and your survival and what's important. It's always been there for me as an area I can't quite shift.

Harry Patch was the last surviving soldier from the First World War who died a few years ago. It's (**Harry Patch 2014**) a photograph of a cuckoo being fed by the host bird. Isn't it ridiculous that it can't see that the child that it's feeding is massive and obviously not from them. Again it's that naivety of not knowing or understanding what's happening to you, but just visually I really liked it and I put it together with **Old Routines 2014** from the pile of receipts and I painted them together because formally they felt very similar.

However, the landscape has been very important and it will always be important and I think it will always be in my practice on one level or another, but it's just not as obvious. It's not physically as obvious as it was a few years ago. Still I had to go into those woods and take those photographs and make those paintings. If I hadn't I wouldn't be doing what I am doing now.

Thinking about the idea of fear and the return to landscape or the return to something that's real and tangible in times of national upheaval so during the wars with the war artists, propaganda and the landscape. Whereas twenty years ago when I was at college landscape was so off the radar it wasn't a fashionable thing or something to be using. It wasn't in the forefront of people's minds to be thinking about landscape. It was quite detached from what was happening. Then I think after 9/11 and the July bombings in London, the landscape has changed. I think its role has changed slightly. I think it is a bit more viable now. I think people do look at landscape in a contemporary way. Its role within contemporary practice has changed.

What's always been important is understanding what it is to be British and understanding our relationship to the landscape and understanding how two world wars have changed and shaped everything down to our expressions and the way we queue up and inform who we are now.

Similarly the hand of history is always important. It's got to have context for me and my work. I'm always looking at art history, not to copy but to position. I look at artists all the time. I'll have a little love affair for a few months like recently it was Paolozzi. The last few years it started with Louise Bourgeois, Phyllida Barlow then Paolozzi. I've also got a long list so there are people that aren't as relevant now, people like Graham Sutherland, Paul Nash, they're there, Henry Moore, Barbara

Hepworth they're kind of filed which I find quite reassuring and others go by the wayside.

At the moment I am looking at Louise Bourgeois again quite a lot and Cy Twombly. There are very few painters I look at. Joan Mitchell is one I've been looking at since my degree show. Per Kirkeby is another one. Baselitz had always been really important and I've been looking at him a lot recently and his early works from the '70s. Munch's always been one. Very unfashionable but his whole merging of line and where he paints these voids where he gets some light coming through from the background are brilliant.

For a while I became totally obsessed with artists' last works and that was why I wanted to include the Manet painting (*The Rabbit* by Edouard Manet) because it was one of the last works he painted. (Included in the exhibition are three works Clare has chosen from the National Museum Wales collection *Frozen Ponds* by John Nash, *The Rabbit* by Edouard Manet and *Civilian Victim* by Philip Jones Griffiths).

You think about Caro and all these people who've had these long careers and then there's that last piece of work. There's this perception as an artist that you're never going to be finished because there's always another work. I'd love to do a show of artist's last paintings. That very last comment, with Paul Nash it was big sunflowers in the sky. With Munch, the last book he was looking at before he died was *The Possessed*.

Being an artist it's obsessive, it's like an addiction. I can't let it lie. I can't go to bed at night if there's something I know I need to do for my work. It's the one thing that makes all the other shit ok. It's like something I've got no control over. It's not a career choice. It was never I am going to be an artist. It was always I am an artist but I'll have a day job to pay for everything. I was always very realistic about things and I'm still realistic. It's a very fine line between this and having to go and work in the Co-Op I know that and I'm very aware of that every day. If I wasn't able to survive from making my work, I'd still have to make my work.

Right it's four o'clock. I'm going to get some paint on that. Probably leave here around five. Drop the car off, walk into town and get some food and carry on."

And so it does. The work, the conversation and the friendship continues.