

Now for Tomorrow II - A Creative Response

From January to June 2016 Nottingham City Museums and Galleries have been working with Becky Cullen, a poet and Nottingham Trent University PhD student funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Midlands3Cities Doctoral Training Partnership. In February and March, Becky led two Creative Writing workshops to explore **Now for Tomorrow II**, using it as inspiration for prose and poetry.

Inspired by the writer Flannery O'Connor's encouragement to 'paint with words', the workshops used the exhibition to do exactly that. Becky led a series of writing exercises based on observation and response. The workshop group considered the way a piece of art can inspire a new narrative or experience in writing, as well as reflect or intuit the artist's experience. Becky also shared examples of Ekphrasis, or poems about pieces of visual art.

On the 9th April the writers met for the final time to give a Speaking Tour of the exhibition, reading their work next to the art which inspired it.

The Now for Tomorrow II writers are:

- Robin Bellamy
- Karen Buckley
- Lynda Clark
- Natasha Harlow
- Alfie Jones

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Room 1

Independence 1997 by Perminder Kaur & Rioters 2014 by Craig Fisher

Lynda Clark

“Let’s go to a puppet show,” he said.

“It’ll be fun,” he said.

I should’ve known. Puppets are sinister. Look at Punch and Judy’s casual take on domestic violence. Look at Igglepiggle, with his staring eyes and misshapen head. A friend’s child said he hated Igglepiggle because he was the soul of a dead boy. I think he’s right.

Even the Tweenies have a Jimmy Savile impression in their past they’ve tried to erase.

My sense of unease grows when the priests take the stage. They carry long copper poles each stuffed with a puppet instead of a candle, dangling legs stopped with bright copper boots. An altar boy comes in with a taper and lights them just the same. They smell of burning cinnamon. As the flames catch, their fuzzy felt bodies crinkle and blacken and each lets out a thin, high-pitched scream. Higher and higher and thinner and thinner, until it’s an edge-of-hearing whine and nothing is left but their little copper boots. A moment’s silence, then each pair pings to the ground like tiny bells tolling.

As the altar boys return to sweep away the ash and the boots with bundles of birch twigs, and the crowd whoops and applauds, I tell him: “I’ll stick with the Muppets, thanks.”

West Wall

Rioters

Alfie Jones

1.

Wooden boards
Cut to size
Plywood heads
Bulky shapes
Blocky features
Wacky colours
Felt and fabric
Cotton and linen
Wool and wood
Faces or masks
Playful and theatrical
Hinting at violence.

2.

The six are assembled
staring blankly at each other,
violence in mind.
Pink Darth Vader,
the high priest of polka dots
And the Teletubbies-
(turned to a life of crime),
forever fallen
from the favour
of the baby in the sun, and
awkwardly shifting in their
ridiculous get-up.
The submarine speaker
rises from the flowerbed.
He struggles for a moment
the life ebbing from him,
masked head drooping:
then there were five.

3.

Dissonance is deafening;
comic book violence
playful death
fun and aggressive
sexually suggestive.
Playschool figures,
complex social comments
reminds me of both
a mask-making day at school
and a really weird house party.

North Wall

Escape Artist

Alfie Jones

What kind of party would it be
to merit such an elaborate escape plan?
Maybe it's a new kind of yoga? Balloon yoga,
the latest fad; tied and weighted, they appear
to hold her. Her, the escape artist. Her, the girl.
Lifeless and suspended like something
from Christopher Robin's toybox; innocent, suggesting
play. Another evening spent with London socialites,
someone's birthday she barely knows.
Only one thing left.

Alone now,
suspended above the boardwalk,
her shadow like a prone wolf decaying onto the frame.
Tousled hair hanging carelessly, just out of reach
of shady claws
Her bright varnish,
her neat, pressed
clothes,
her jewelry.

Lifeless like a delicately tortured marionette,
strings cut, suspended like a prize
from hook a duck.

The Five Sides of the Head Mistress

Robin Bellamy

The old school mistress is encased and boxed,
a story the bell told in her hand
Dame Agnes MBE finally fell,
her left arm trembling in pain.

She lies in her chair in a deep long sleep,
in her office of trophies and homework books.
Notes and files, reports and busts,
all shelved in the box to gather the dust.

On the wall the A to Z of fame
inscribed in calligraphic gold
with ticks and crosses in little boxes
and sports day trophies looking rather old.

The school notice board is pinned to her chest,
her thoughts now echoing in the ground:
Be punctual, dear girl! Try your best, young boy!
Get in line, or it's detention this time!

But the clock that ticked had finally stopped,
prim and particular, laid at rest
and wrapped in brown paper with her old sports vest.
No hymn was needed, the prayers were said;
the pendant cross on her untouched breast.

Lager than Life: The Sunderland Mona Lisa

Robin Bellamy

Hello, yes this is me here in the frame
on a downer on a Saturday afternoon
with no money in my pocket
no food in the fridge
and not many thoughts in my mind.
Just tobacco, drugs and lighter –
rolling my own daydreams
into the bottom of this cold metal can.

Yes, this was you, my brother,
my playmate who bombed out of school,
became fixated but uncreative and stayed home
in an alcoholic cobweb of teenage smoky days.
I use your image to immortalise your despair –
I'll be well-known and in the latest artistic –ism,
you look into thin air in a cold and timeless chasm,
and when you get the job, and then the sack
I know I will not look back.

Now I'm on the South Bank,
got a place in Pimlico.
Fame came easily, just
with the signature of my name.
I am with the people
who sadly are the art.
My income is on the up and up
while you stay suspended down in the frame.
I write articles for the weekend press
and then rest – reap the rewards
and you stay depressed
at home and drunk and bored.

The True Grit Art Award

Robin Bellamy

Her juggernaut hands have galvanised this rock
pulled and bound but not cut from the block
then hammered and stuck it into a net
to let it all gradually set
with wire cement and rubble.

Is it a meteorite fallen from grace
on hard times in artistic space?
An atrocity of materials is definitely here,
invites the viewer to interfere;
the wire implements the trouble.

What is there in this work?
Crushed mud, metal and brick –
the emperors' clothes or the builder's skip?
Brutality, not beauty is in the art of the boulder –
a mass of rag and bone

We move on and start to mutter;
Is this an artist or a Dadaist nutter?
The crumbled mortar is just a concrete bubble,
that leaves us with naught but simple words to juggle:
the work instead intends us to struggle.

The Imposition by Helena Ben-Zenou

Natasha Harlow

Four drawings, square, almost monochrome, like stills.

Touches of iron oxide red.

A structural web of steel: girders, rivets, props.

The filmstrip judders and stalls.

In the restoration of a dream

she asks "what's supporting what?"

The imposition of time, of structure, of ideas new and old

invades: an affront to this dusty, rusty thicket of beams.

It cannot object or protest.

It stands mute, dumbfounded.

The patron saint of archaeologists:

Helena sees through time.

A Bit Part at the Barlow Ball

Robin Bellamy

She the sculptor was too brave
ever to carve a single bronze.

She rejected the cast and broke the mould
and then she modelled a solitary soul.

With tape and glue and shovel and ballast
she could produce whatever you asked.

In this piece the raw materials say it all –
no skills or methods on which to fall.

This dull grey ball sheds no delights
instead it relies on artistic right.

No Degas ballerinas, idyllic style
no cubic enigma, Mona Lisa smile.

Not even a creative or artistic abstraction
and certainly no secrets in artistic fashion.

The world sees you now as grey globular spit
without much purpose – or uplifting wit.

Distemper on Irish Linen (Swallows)

Natasha Harlow

Somehow sculptural,
pastel traces
the blue arc of a wing,
linked by MDF hinge.

Beside, the quilted white on white –
not Jasper's Stars and Stripes –
a palimpsest,
archaeological landscapes unfolding
beneath a deep breath.

Distemper: puppies and inoculations

Distemper: grumpy frustrations

Distemper: "fluid veils of colour"

Distemper...

"THIS GALLERY IS UNDER CONSTANT VIDEO SURVEILLANCE"

...on Irish linen.

Palimpsest II - Anne Morrell

Karen Buckley

Cotton fabric. Unbleached cream.
The colour of seashells.
Stretched in the pine frame.
Patches of taut neatness
meet tucks and gathers,
pleats and running threads,
like squares of smocked bodice
or paper folds,
or the soft skirts
of a concertina.

There is a landscape here;
without the demarcations of colour,
it still conjures light sand,
a beach that meets a smooth, pale sea,
squares that float and drift
like gentle rafts.
A bird's eye view
of something still
and stilling.

We saw the three rafts.
Clutching our children on the shoreline,
we willed them to drift towards us,
yet feared that stepping on would make them topple us
into the smooth, pale sea.
They seemed so still there
with no wind to push them
and no man on board to steer with a tall stick,
as we had imagined on the long walk here.
The children blinked in the pale light,
toes scuffing the sand,
waiting for nothing to happen.

'I find marks made visible by wind, ice, snow,' says the artist.
'All create a language.'
And I think of the hands
that have worked this world
into running stitch.

East Wall

Ceremonial Dwellings by T. J. Cooper

Natasha Harlow

The Hermit
scuttles
in his rock cut tomb
brushing aside the unnameable horrors
that gather, with the webs,
in the crevices of his cave –
and his mind.

Outside, the dryads whisper in the trees
their dry laughs crackling and rustling;
so many whoops and chitters.

Thomas Joshua is searching for something in black and white.
Arranging, composing, an aria in dark and light
he secretly wants to capture an Elf, a Yeti, a phantom
unaware that something lurks beyond in the shadows.

This print is small, indistinct.
I can't quite make it out;
my mind goes to work
spilling messily over the page
like an inkblot projection,
then revelation.

Three Stones - Marian Adnams, 1968

Karen Buckley

We are three stones,
compact as old ice,
the colour and toughness of teeth.

In each of us a circular hole
holds the sky
like a sapphire heart.

Perhaps we long
for the conical hills
or the white streak of distant cloud.

Faceless, our heads taper upwards,
thinking lofty thoughts.

My convex belly
catches the light.

South Wall

Irene, 1953 – Before.

Lynda Clark

A woman, her hair in curlers, covered over with a headscarf. Formidable. A half-smoked-cigarette drooping from her bulldog lips. Her eyes dark and challenging. Hands on hips, a functional tabard over a floral dress, nylon so cheap it'd go up with a whomp if one speck of burning ash from her cigarette fell onto it. She wouldn't even try to cover herself if that happened, just coolly pat the flames out with hard hands. Hard hands that have seen hard work, bleach-reddened and rough, rough in other ways too, more accustomed to grab and shove than stroke and caress. Better suited to slapping out fires than sheltering a flickering flame.

She's waiting for something, and whoever or whatever it is is going to get a rollicking when they finally turn up.

Irene, 1953 – After.

Your Irene and my Irene, they're not so different. The hard stare is there, the iron-backbone with a will to match. The soft curls are there, although my Irene's are not, will likely never be, ready and your Irene's are perfection.

All it comes down to, as it so often does, is a matter of opportunity.

Your Irene looks like she's waiting for a suitor in a smart suit, or a tutor who'll impart knowledge, or a fellow party guest. Whoever it is, they're not one hundred per cent welcome, but their approach is tolerable, and they'll be tricked out in similar finery.

My Irene waits for a drunk husband, or a workshy son, or a daughter throwing her life away on a good for nothing man, or a dog that's smelled a bitch in heat and run away to sniff her out, deaf to Irene's calls for him to come back. Whichever it is, when they finally get back here, to this doorstep, in this neighbourhood of terraced houses and yards filled with washing, they'll get an earful. You're Irene's guest will just get a hard stare that will make them pluck at the lilac bush by the summer house rather than meet her gaze.

Your Irene's hands are soft, unaccustomed to any work other than needlework, and not the kind of needlework my Irene does, which she calls 'darnin'. My Irene's hands are hard, knuckles swollen. She massages the joints for relief that never comes.

And maybe, in another time, and with other opportunities, or lack of, they'd switch places, and your Irene would be my Irene, and my Irene would be your Irene and no matter how often they may tell us that these things are down to hard work and not what you were born into, we both know that to be a lie.

Falling Asleep

Natasha Harlow

A perfect curl of childhood
a lock in a mother's locket
untangled and strewn
throughout her life.

The strands are pulling
this way and that;
a keepsake, a memento
tugging on her strings.

She sleeps, exhausted,
laid bare,
no clasped cover to hide
her vulnerability now.

Stranger – Shizuka Yokomizo

Alfie Jones

1.

Busy in my sanctuary
preparing, tidying
lavishing in an empty Tokyo Sunday
safe in castle walls.
Yet something is wrong,
a prickly sensation of being watched
lurking in the shadows,
peeping through my window
Transgressive interloper.
I wring my hands with anxiety,
frozen, as a camera flash
leaves me exposed.

2.

I creep, for art I creep.
I capture, for art I make waves
in a lazy Sunday scene
breaking the four walls,
inviting others into
an awkward moment
captured in time.
My anxiously consenting
lightning in a bottle.

3.

Stolen Intimacy.
A tall Japanese Woman,
proud faced.
Body language which aims at composed,
but falls short.
Feet which say discomfort,
hands which say discomfort,
a face that says indignant,
eyes that say "I'm patient".
The shadow says
"I'm waiting".

The Judges - Before

Alfie Jones

Stern and grumpy
chins and jowels,
Lewis Carroll caricatures.

Or a kitchen prankster
wearing oven gloves
like Deputy Dawg.

Rows of B-list celebrities
on trashy TV shows,
childhood nightmare critics.

My friend, the judge,
who lives on a boat
married to a frog.

Sitting in a circle
Frowning, looking down
on rows of frog footmen.

The Judges – After

Alfie Jones

Layer on Layer,
the fear of being judged,
embodied in the art,
embodied in the format.

Who can pick just one after all?
Like a child in the cereal aisle,
the adult alone knowing the responsibility,
the effort to carry, audit and stock,
regulate cupboard space.
But this is not cereal.

Baubles and bandits
and hideous vulgar curves and splodges,
contrasted by delicate form,
frames and flowers.

Everything about it screams abstract,
It's more alive than objects have the right to be.

The longer I sit, the more giddy I get.
It's a pre-school art class with marbled glass.

I want to organize the chaos,
tidy up the mess.
But life is untidy, sprawling...

'How to' Poems

For this exercise I wanted writers to think about an artistic process and write about it. I used my poem 'How to Hang Washing' as an example. Becky Cullen

How to Hang Washing

Becky Cullen

It must be spring. There should be blackthorn
blossom, a smudge of sun across your cheek.

From your patch of earth, you'll hear the crest
of chatter from the playground at the school.

These pegs nip snugly, in time with magpie
calls, as your arms lift, stretch, clip, repeat.

How to Paint like an Impressionist

(After Becky Cullen)

Karen Buckley

It must be winter. There should be rooftops.
A chill in the air dabs at your cheek.

From your open window you'll hear a dark carriage,
a murmur of muffled Parisians trudging.

This brush, soft as the fall of snow, strokes the canvas,
as your wrist bends, lifts, holds the day.

How to Register a Print

Natasha Harlow

Line up line up line up. Linocut
your fingertips with sharpened tools,
watch buttery curls fall.

Each colour a different layer
of anxiety, patience, skill
The Big Reveal... breath suspended...
has it worked?

Every one the same, yet subtly different,
the corners make a match,
the colours blend and blur,
outlines crisp, sharp, pulled into focus.

Registration is complete
and now repeat
repeat ...

How to Write Songs

Alfie Jones

Take deep breaths.
Be still -nobody is watching,
Do not try to write,
know that writing happens through you.
You are a conduit for echoes,
silences and vibrations.

Strum and hum
and pick and play
words as skin
chords as skeleton
inflections the features,
emotions the face.

A living breathing ghost arises
from a scrap of letters
and fiercely scribbled hieroglyphs,
easily mistaken for scrawl.

But at the end,
it is not scrap
it is the sheet
through which
the intangible
and invisible
become fleetingly audible.