

Notes from a Gallery

Beth Junor

Sometimes in life we pull the threads of the past up around us – for protection perhaps, although I've always only experienced this action as natural, essential for survival. Especially for the privileged in today's world, that is those of us who have enough of the basics of food, shelter and health arising from these, survival can move beyond the physical to become also cultural, political and spiritual. My gallery of Scottish and European contemporary art in the town of St. Andrews on Scotland's north-east coast arose out of the UK government's austerity policies. It was during swingeing cuts to public services that I began to draw the threads of the past around me, not for comfort but to lead me into the future, to my gallery.

'The' past. I do not write 'my past' since every action we undertake in the public sphere has been made possible by those who have gone before us.

J. M. Barrie wrote, 'I think one remains the same person throughout [life], merely passing from one room to another.'

I'm not materially wealthy by any means and never have been, yet life has led me through a palace of riches. Each different room has been populated with the best of people, living and dead. The doors have been kept open, so that the community outside, local, national or international has been able to enter at will while my own work has reached outward. I've had one life as a young activist, a professional life as a speech and language therapist, and now I have my own art gallery. Running a gallery, like the first two, is also a social undertaking. I've signed off another codicil to my contract with community, which every human being enters at birth and can fulfill according to circumstance and choosing.

In 2017 austerity cuts to public services began to hit home. I and two other experienced colleagues in speech and language therapy were facing redundancy. My two colleagues were younger and perhaps hardest hit. I could take early retirement at the same time, so began preparing my payback project to the arts that had always sustained me in life. I came to my gallery from the literary side, specifically poetry and non-fiction - I'd already edited the letters of

Valda Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid's wife) for instance. Music and paintings too have always given me sustenance.

I read everything I could around the skills and knowledge I'd need and undertook training. The nature of galleries was already changing and I wanted mine also to be a place where anyone could walk through an open door and feel welcome, ask any questions and not feel they needed to be an expert to appreciate art. I wanted it to be a place of discussion, debate, learning and discovery – communication again, the trait that defines us as human beings, the gift that manifests itself in many forms, whether through spoken or signed language, the written word, music or the visual arts and education. I deliberately described it as showing 'Scottish and European Contemporary Art' because I see Scotland, now and in the future, as part of Europe. For a gallery in St. Andrews, the town of my *alma mater*, with its strong historical relationship with Europe, the description was perfect.

There's been a continual dialogue within my gallery, an exploration in each exhibition of the relationship between the literary and visual arts. Poetry, novels, evoke imagery within us – unique and essentially private to each individual. With painting the imagery is out there, available in a form that can be shared between people, a catalyst for sharing life's experiences. Yet sometimes we struggle for words to describe the impact a painting has on us. Then, a poet can articulate this for us. Lyn Moir's sequence of poems about Velázquez painting *Las Meninas* (1656, Museo del Prado, Madrid) is a fine example of this. It's a circular relationship.

It's an enormous privilege for a gallerist to witness the responses of gallery visitors. The artist is back working in their studio while I've been able to hear people's stories of what a painting or poem means to them. Having Sandy Moffat's monumental new composite portrait *Scotland's Voices* (2016-17, oil on canvas, 170 x 230cm) in the gallery for a prolonged period was a marvellous experience, to meet so many people who told me how the musicians and writers depicted had touched their own lives. During Sarah Longley's exhibition, which featured a triptych of paintings from her father Michael Longley's book *Ghetto*, people would come in and speak about how the WW2 Holocaust had impacted on the lives of their own family and friends. Ruth Nicol's *East Neuk* solo exhibition conferred a status on local people's familiar

landscapes and elicited expressions of a great love for the land of Fife. It's the gallerist's responsibility to convey as much of this as possible to the artists.

We had a lengthy lockdown in Scotland from March to July. The local government BID (business improvement district) group distributed posters in time for re-opening that read 'Social Distancing in place here' with the ubiquitous symbols. I cut off this line and replaced it with 'Physical Distancing and Social Cohesion in place here'. Language as a tool for thought.

The artist Nalini Malani¹ (b. 1944, Kolkata) doesn't use the phrase 'social distancing' because it contains echoes of India's caste system. She has spoken about the impact of the pandemic on her home country of India (she is now based in Mumbai and Amsterdam) – of how the hurried implementation of lockdown and the sudden halting of public transport left migrant workers stranded in cities, forced to walk long distances to return to their home towns and villages, and of the impossibility of households keeping apart from each other in poorer, crowded neighbourhoods. So it has been globally – as seen in similar reports from Brazilian favelas, prompting renewed calls for a universal basic income.² Malani notes,

The bourgeoisie in India have been protesting as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, but very few people are looking at how marginalised people are treated in their own backyard.³

What a powerful virus this is, exposing the fault lines in all our societies!

I'm moving my gallery online for now, in adapting to current changed circumstances. I'm enjoying learning new skills in filming and editing, for enriched online content – interviews, poetry readings, studio visits that will be posted on my website from November. We live in a democracy that demands constant vigilance – not only regarding how we treat each other as individuals when times are hard, but also of how the state is treating us. One of the most odious

¹ Nalini Malani's exhibition 'Can You Hear Me?' is at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 23 September to May 2021. www.whitechapelgallery.org

² Mara Nogueira (Birkbeck, University of London), Aiko Ikemura Amaral (LSE Latin America and Caribbean Centre) and Gareth A. Jones (LSE Latin America and Caribbean Centre) in <https://tinyurl.com/y4wu6nnz> 3 June 2020.

³ 'Art Without Borders: Nalini Malani' by Debika Ray in *Apollo: The International Art Magazine*, September 2020.

pieces of news to emerge recently is that the London government has been lobbying the US to support a controversial new warhead for Trident missiles – a letter was sent in April, yes April, at the height of the pandemic in the UK. It's unconscionable. What kind of future culture is being created in this pandemic? These are questions that need to be asked, addressed thoroughly. When we first went into lockdown in Scotland in March, my thought was, 'Ok so now our children can't go to school, we've a health service at breaking point, we can't get flour or yeast in the shops, we've no libraries or theatres or galleries to go to...two thirds of the world's population would be quite justified in saying 'Welcome to our world.' ' Now I'm filled with grief and anger whenever I hear of us losing sight of life enriching values alongside the most tragic loss of all, of so many lives lost here and around the world through war, poverty and this pandemic that is relentlessly exposing it all.

Beth Junor is Director of the Junor Gallery, <https://junorgallery.scot>. Here she is editing a series of pamphlets, *Artists and their Work*. She worked in the NHS and education as a speech and language therapist for 25 years, latterly specialising in childhood autism spectrum disorders. She translated *I Am Special: A Workbook to Help Children, Teens and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders to Understand their Diagnosis, Gain Confidence and Thrive* by Peter Vermeulen, London: Jessica Kingsley, 2013) from French. She edited and introduced the letters of Valda Grieve (*Scarcely Ever Out of My Thoughts*, Edinburgh: WordPower Books, 2007). She is co-editor with Angus Calder of an anthology of poems from wars (*The Souls of the Dead are Taking the Best Seats*, Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2004). She wrote a history of women's resistance to the stationing of first-strike nuclear weapons at Greenham Common, where she lived in a tent for three and a half years (*Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp: A History of Non-Violent Resistance*, London: Working Press, 1995). Beth is also a poet and is currently learning how to make short films.