

Transcript 10 Questions to Emma Talbot

1. How did you come into contact with the Kunsthalle Giessen?

I was invited by Nadia Ismail to make an exhibition for Kunsthalle Giessen quite a long time ago, a few years ago and in between time there was the pandemic and the Kunsthalle was renovated. So, we've been developing a discussion and discourse around a solo exhibition in the Kunsthalle for a long time. It allowed us to really think about the subject of the work and the way the work would be installed, and it felt like a very thorough process.

2. What inspires you when painting the figures?

The figures are usually an idea of myself but seen from the inside so they don't have faces because from inside I can't see my own face I just see an open portal. The figures sometimes have multiple limbs because I'm trying to imagine what it's like for me to be moving in a certain way, doing a number of things all at once. The figure is always searching, curious, exploring and trying to find meaning: And also the figure can operate a little bit like a an avatar, someone that other people could project onto as a figure that leads them through the ideas in the work.

3. What do the snakes mean?

The snakes are a representation of nature as something which is sometimes threatening or challenging, but it also could be protective. So, either they are moving about in a space and make the space feel more volatile, or they appear in relation to the figures as something threatening, or they can frame a space in a really protective way to give an idea of us in relation to the natural world. And that our relationship with the natural world is not something very simple; it's quite a complicated, entangled relationship. The form of the snake allows me to make these sorts of atmospheres of flux in the work and also the serpent can be a messenger, or it could be an idea of something, which is representative of the potential and power of nature.

4. What do the goblets on the platform of 'Your Birth: The Epic Historical Moment You Can't Remember' mean?

'Your Birth: The Epic Historical Moment You Can't Remember' is a piece of work that describes the fact that we've all been born but most of us can't remember the experience. So, it proposes that the experience of birth is equivalent to something very, very ancient. So, I thought about the way that objects from ancient cultures, artefacts were presented in museums as evidence of a society, a life, a culture, but that we didn't have experience of so we weren't familiar with them. And I thought about presenting our own birth as a historical moment that seemed very far away and quite alien to us. The goblets mimic some of the shapes of artefacts from ancient cultures and inside each one of them is some paint. And those amounts of paint describe different stages of the process of menstruation, the cycle of menstruation. And in that respect, menstruation is represented as a part of the cycle of fertility and our own coming into being. So, the sense of looking at objects are not really knowing or understanding their use, or their meaning is part of this alienation that I'm trying to achieve which is to show how our own birth is somehow quite distant from us.

5. Why did you choose the materials silk and velour? What do you associate with these textiles?

I chose silk as a surface to paint on because I wanted to find an equivalent to the handmade paper that I had been making drawings on, but I wanted to be able to work at a much larger scale. So, I thought that silk has been used traditionally in painting for thousands of years so I knew it was viable. But I also realised, I would be able to cut it and shape it and maybe hang it in a different way not only against a wall but in spaces to make installations. But also, I could make large scale works which were monumental in their subject, but which didn't feel too much like they were really heavy so silk was the ideal material for that. Velour is practical in the sense that I can shape forms with it because I use that kind of stretchy velour, and it helps me make shapes for this three-dimensional works. Also, I can paint on it, so that I can really change the surface of the velour, and it has a kind of shiny dense surface quality that I really think works well with the three-dimensional forms.

6. Is there a spiritual dimension in your work and what does spirituality mean to you personally?

The work in the Kunsthalle Giessen is about the experience of being alive and the human experience, and inevitably, this includes questions of spirituality, that humans have the capacity for very inventive thinking, and we project, and we imagine, and that involves a sense of something bigger than ourselves - a kind of energy that's much bigger than our pedestrian lives. In that sense, I think there is a much bigger energy in the world than just what humans construct. And I think there's a lot of energy and forces that we don't fully understand or know, and that kind of mystery is something quite fascinating, that I touch on in my work quite a lot.

7. The text elements are very philosophical and certain figures like 'Rootless Plant' are reminiscent of Indian deities. With what philosophies or theories do you work?

The subject of the exhibition is the human experience and I don't use one philosophy or a particular theory to drive the work. The work is a process of researching lots of different positions, lots of different thoughts, lots of different approaches to the human experience. And those have involved looking at contemporary theory, theory about our own relationships to ecology, feminist theory, ideas about technology. But also, I've looked into Buddhism and the work of Hildegard von Bingen, who's someone that I find very interesting. And across a wide range of research, I sort of pull into the work lots of questions and proposals about what it is to be alive. "Rootless Plant" could look like it references an Indian deity. There isn't something that I've copied or made work in reference to in particular and some of the figures in my work have had multiple limbs as a way of describing the way a figure could be connected to a lot of different things at once, or a figure could be doing a lot of things at once. So, the multiple limbed figure is a kind of motif that's been present in the work. In a sense, it's like a plant with many branches, it's like a plant with many issues. So, I acknowledge that there are links to ways that we've described, or humans have described religious or spiritual ideas, but the work doesn't seek to reiterate a particular religion or a particular philosophy. It's really more of a kind of space of reflect on. I don't work with one particular philosophy or theory. My work is an amalgam of research in a lot of different areas, usually I'm trying to understand myself. What I think, why do I think what I think, and to kind of consider quite existential questions. The texts are text, that I write myself that really articulate the questions that I'm asking myself, that I'm considering. There is a way of sharing questions about life with the audience. I do a

lot of research in terms of reading texts, contemporary theories about our relationships with ecology, with nature, feminist theory and current affairs. And I look into lots of different kind of references such as Hildegard von Bingen, Buddhism, mediaeval manuscripts and poetry and lots and lots of different references that inform my own thinking, so I kind of draw on those a bit when I'm developing the work. The figure with multiple limbs is a motif in my work and usually it describes a figure that's connected to a lot of things at once or that is in movement. And its relationship to the representation of deities in other religions is not deliberate in the sense that I didn't copy it from anywhere else, but I see the relationship and its references to our own human desire to connect to a more spiritual reading of the world.

8. What secrets do you believe the eye adorned with the cryptic phrase 'imagine an all-seeing eye' holds? Is it a portal to a hidden truth or a mere reflection of our own inner mysteries?

It's all of those things. It's really a question which is existential about how we locate ourselves in relation to the process of being alive. Do we imagine ourselves as subject to a more powerful being? A God that can listen to our inner thoughts, a God that has some control over the direction of our lives. Is that a reassuring, magical way of thinking? Or is it that we develop ideas of something that's external to our everyday lives as a kind of necessary way of developing our own spirituality, our own creativity, our own potential to imagine? So, it's a question, the work doesn't provide the answer is something that we can't answer, but it's definitely something that humans have been preoccupied by for all of their existence.

9. What role does grief play in your artistic practice? What does it mean to you?

Grief is a part of life and it's a part of the process of understanding how temporary and relatively brief life is. It's bound up with love and attachment and it's a reflective space which allows us to see qualities in ourselves that might not be apparent in the rest of life, so grief has a profound deep quality which reveals our own fragilities, our own strengths and it reveals how fundamental love is. I'm a widow, so I have had a very direct experience of very deep grief in my life, and it really did change my attitudes to life, to my purpose in life, and how I view things. And I think about grief a lot as a really incredible space and something which, although it's really painful, it also adds a depth to our lives, which I explore a lot in my work.

10. How do you find the motivation to keep on painting?

This is a really good question because it's something that matters to all artists. How do you carry on? Why do you do what you do? What's the point of what you're doing? These could be doubts which prevent you from making work but in my case, I think I've found that making work is a part of me. It helps me think, it helps me explore what I'm thinking about, it helps me understand, it helps me articulate ideas and without it, I would feel like there was something missing. So, I think I would be making work for myself anyway just because that's something I really need to do. I'd say I can be very driven, and I probably make quite a lot of work, but it really is because it's a very large part of my character to want to always use this space to think and make creatively. It is something that gives me a lot of pleasure and is something that always interests me. I always find it interesting to do and interesting to explore