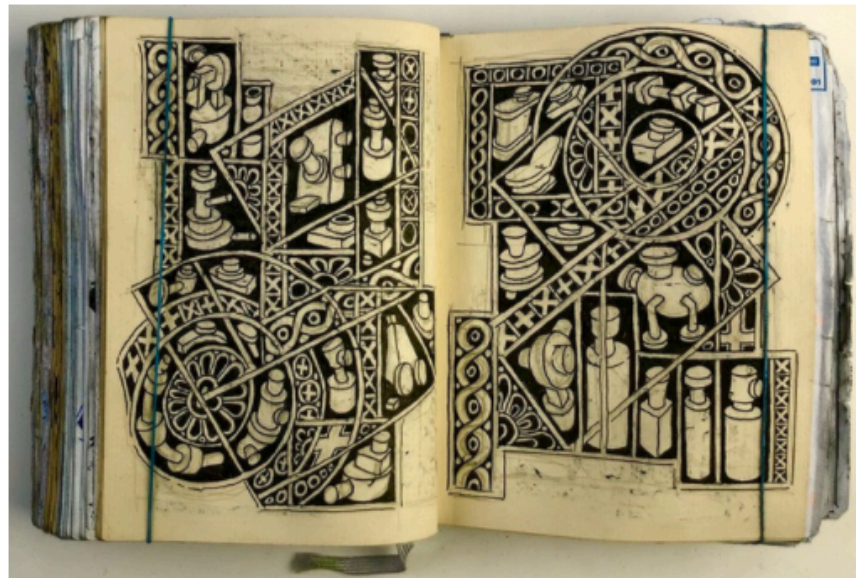


## Light and Memory Interview with Gary Clough from Royal Collage of Art

08/07/2021

Gary Clough from Royal College of Art, gave us a brilliant interview about key subjects of Light and Memory which are storytelling, silent narratives, visual voices and sketchbooks.

Thanks to his kindness and being a quite generous scholar, we utterly relished his well rounded talk and it was also so nice to have a joyful conversation with him.



Gary Clough / Head of Art & Design Graduate Diploma, Royal College of Art

*He has over 25 years experience in the higher education sector, with a specialist focus in international and transnational education. Gary's research interests focus on the use of drawing as a catalyst for the augmenting, assimilating and constructing visual narrative archives. The sketchbook is a key element within his practice and process and is linked to a series of international pedagogic research projects.*

*As you're drawing and you're not necessarily just depicting what you see, you are already translating it into a new language. So for me, the sketchbook is not about collection. It's about transcription. It's about decoding and re-decoding and representing.*

**1. Gary, what was the first impulse that drove you to the Far East?**

Well, a number of things. The main reason I went to the Far East was in 2020, I was actually invited as an academic to study and work, but fundamentally work with fellow academics in Beijing at the Beijing University of Technology. And it was an incredible experience. This is over 20 years ago. It was eight years before the Beijing Olympics and there still is a real sense of mystery about China at that stage. I mean, for me particularly, I didn't know too much about China, but I have always been fascinated by its culture and by the objects. But I think also just this notion of craft as well, something that was always interesting. I suppose fundamentally what was exciting for me is that my first experience of China was actually living and working there.



I wasn't just a tourist going to see the famous sights. I didn't go to see the Terracotta Warriors. I didn't go down to Beijing or Shanghai specifically to see the Forbidden Palace or to see, you know, the West Bund and all of these. So when a lot of people's first experience of China, these sorts of like two or three-week tours where they sort of fly around all over the place and live on a bus, live in the hotel. So I suppose for me what was really exciting is I spent the first twelve weeks of my experience in China actually immersed in contemporary China and actually really began to understand very quickly that those traditions of craft are still there and that tradition and value of craft is still there. I think that's probably one of the things that really drew me back to China again and again.

But it wasn't just China, because I've also worked in Japan and I've worked in Korea and I've also worked in Taiwan. I've worked all over China. So, again, the thing is, a lot of people were just talking earlier about time zones. I mean, it's incredible to think that China doesn't have time zones and most of East Asia doesn't have time zones. And they are huge, you know. It's five hours from Beijing to Hong Kong by plane. In an hour, you can actually fly out. You can fly the whole of the UK in an hour. You know, we had tiny. So I think that

sense of the Orient as well. What the orientation is I think contemporary East Asia is really exciting and really intriguing. And I do feel for me it was always the craft that drew me to those destinations. So, very long answer to a very short question there. So sorry about that.

2. How do you explain your collecting and contemplating these traditional artistic motifs in different cultures and the new symbols of modernity, which actually have a philosophical stance in conflict with each other? In other words, why did you need to use mechanical parts and ornament together in your work?



Let me start and go in reverse order then, and this notion of, you know, decorative and mechanical, both of them actually are things that are designed to function. This decoration has a function. Decoration is quite often seen as something that's superfluous, something that is purely surface, something that could be stripped away, obviously within the history of contemporary art and design. We look at the Bauhaus and we maybe look at William Morris now, if we look at the sort of British traditions of craft and then you have this idea of less is more. Then I suppose when you think about the mechanical, you think about this function being very physical, everything moving and interlocking and fundamentally making something happen. But for me they are very similar because I think decoration or surface decoration or it's a narrative based decoration specifically is about actually making something happen. It's about making the value of the object and the

significance of the objects specific to its task, its role, its social status. Just as a petrol engine, the pistons are designed in order to move the oxygen and move the fuel into a particular place in order for it to actually spark and make energy and momentum.

*I see drawing as an engine in some fundamental engine, makes things make something go, make something happen, makes a change.*

The other aspect for me about this notion of the dichotomy of the sort of like apparent sort of like opposition of those two things. For me, the notion of mechanical is very much around this notion of the engine, but also what I'd like to hear me talk about is the engine and where the engine is put, because I see drawing as an engine, I see drawing as an engine in some fundamental engine, makes things make something go, make something happen, makes a change. I think drawing is an engine, I mean, and I feel very strongly about this is that, it's something that comes into this sort of apparatus and a certain amount of changes happen and then something comes from it which is in a different place or is actually be translated into a different form of energy, material, substance. In terms of what the earlier parts of the question, when you start talking about this notion of motifs and talking about different sort of cultural phenomena or different cultural references and



how I collect those, for me; the sketchbook is really important because, in a way, I don't see it as a collection tool. I see it much more like a filtration tool, because actually, I do draw direct from life, but the process has already started to change or transcription or a transition. So, I'm translating these forms. Obviously what I'm using is my own personal filter, and that filter is somebody that's grown up with, you know, Tex Avery, Hanna Barbera, watching The Flintstones when I was 12 years old, but also somebody that's been very fortunate to visit some of the best collections of art and design in the world, you know, and somebody who's worked and lived in the building and architectural and craft industries, so when you're drawing all of those sort of experiences act as filters. As you're drawing and you're not necessarily just depicting what you see, you are already translating it into a new language. So for me, the sketchbook is not about collection. It's about transcription. It's about decoding and re-decoding and representing.

*Actually, the journey is about encounters. It's about responses too and that leads you to the next. I suppose that, too, is an element of narrative that really pervades throughout process.*

**3. You are using panels to create some visuals. Is this because to try to take advantage of the world of storytelling? So, can we envision this as an experimental narrative style emerges?**

(...)

Grids clearly do reference narrative, is an aspect of the notion of a plan. I'm fundamentally a sculptor. I am somebody who thinks in three dimensions. The grid gives you the opportunity to have a three dimensional and two dimensional, I suppose, a set of scaffolding with which to build things upon. But he does drool very heavily from comic book art. I grew up with 2000 A.D. I grew up with the X-Man. I grew up with both Marvel and DC, maybe references you might not know that The Dandy and The Beano, very sort of like classic children's UK comics.

(...)

I also like to play with the fact that you're not quite sure if the grid is a framework or if it's actually an integral part of the narrative. But what I really enjoy most of all, is all of the narratives are as much as they can be, not planned. To say you don't plan something is impossible. You know, I picked up a pencil, therefore I planned it. But in terms of where things land and where they turn, there's an element of maybe psychogeography, this notion of the draft where you're going on a journey, but the destination is not fixed. Actually, the journey is about encounters. It's about responses to and that leads you to the next. I suppose that, too, is an element of narrative that really pervades throughout process.

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4. As an artist and educator who are associated with and working together with different cultures, your works do not have any intermediary text, can we call your works as a silent communication form that can reach everyone at this point? Do you think you can express yourself better with this silent communication method?



This is a very interesting question. It's quite an interesting thing to talk about. Because, from a personal perspective, I'm highly dyslexic and I also come from a generation most people thought the dyslexia was a small town in Eastern Europe and not actually a learning disability. So obviously, writing for me was something that I've always found very challenging. I'm obviously going through education and in my current day job, that's basically all I do is write. So I found my way through it. One of the reasons why I do drop texting sometimes and I do drop new numbers into the drawing sometimes, and if I do, to be very honest, it's completely fake (smiles).

I use the numbers and the words or the letters almost as I would sort of a type of mark making. At the same time, I am offering up this idea that there is this very complex narrative. There's an element of slightly duplicitous or

slightly sort of like subterfuge. I'm sort of pretending there's a real sense of sort of order here and there is. But generally the numbers in the letters are just fragments pulled at random, not dissimilar to fitting the chair into the box or fitting something in.

In terms of silent narrative, I've always been somebody that has been very fascinated by traveling, fascinated by multicultural disciplines. I grew up in a very multicultural city in the UK. I grew up in Birmingham, a massive Sikh, Asian, African being community, big Irish and Scottish communities as well, and Eastern European communities. I think I've always been somebody that's communicated across cultures. Drawing is always something that is just so universal. Even in terms of like, you could just with your finger, you can draw in the in the air. You can just sort of signal a perpendicular, horizontal, another perpendicular. And somebody knows you're talking about a chair and, you know, just because of that basic ability. So I suppose for me, I would say I don't think it is silent. I actually think it's the loudest form of communication I can actually think of in many ways. I think what I'm dealing with is visual noise, because I think we, I inhabit historically and through my own memories, but also in the day to day sentence, as maybe we all do, an incredibly visually overwhelmingly rich environment. I am a lot older than you guys, when I when I started thinking about computers, in a computer studies for me was adding up in ones and zeros. I didn't even see a computer until I was sort of in my thirties.

*That notion of silence is a really interesting one for me, because I don't feel the drawings are silent. The narrative by nature, so I'm not suggesting is shouting, but for me, in a way it is, what it is, is definitely it's without text. When I use text, I use it in the very sort of slightly psyconic way.*

I think the reality for me is that we now live in an age where everything is in penetrable because of the amount of information. But actually, I think it's always been the case. I don't think it's new. I just think we've forgotten that actually we live not just in a visual world either. We are fortunate to be in a situation where I'm using all of my senses. But at the same time, it's an informational stimulus rich environment we live in. And for me, that sharing. That notion of silence is a really interesting one for me, because I don't feel the drawings are silent. The narrative by nature, so I'm not suggesting is shouting, but for me, in a way it is, what it is, is definitely it's without text. When I use text, I use it in the very sort of slightly psyconic way. Slightly sarcastic or slightly sort of like, it's not reverentially in any way. I still have problems with writing. Occasionally I have to vent my anger. But yeah, I should have got over it by now. So I hope that explains my position. It's getting a big pay meandering sort of answer.

*...sometimes getting out of the sketchbook is really tough because it's a really nice place. It's lovely and safe. It's warm. It's cozy. And actually sometimes you have to really sort of like wrench yourself away from the thing.*

**5. We can think that sketchbooks that reflect the inner world of an artist actually have a naive structure. Is it better to work through sketchbooks at expressing your inwardness more effectively, and also at getting you inside yourself in storytelling?**

Again, it's something I could talk for a long time because as I said, for me, the sketchbook is like a virtual studio. It's a place where things happen. And obviously, as a full time educator, somebody who's got lots of different roles, obviously having those moments in the studio, which is the tradition where are actually very valuable times. But the sketchbook is something I can access while I'm on the train or whether I'm just sitting on the tube. I do like traveling. So I see a lot of this happens in airports, lobbies, liminal spaces where you're transitioning through.



The other thing about the sketchbook in terms of that sort of private place is the fact is that often I think people think the sketchbooks, a place where you put stuff and then you take it and it becomes something real. And I think for me, one of the key arguments I've always struggled with is this idea of what is drawing for. You know, are you drawing a model or a cat? Is it like a preliminary drawing for a large scale painting or sculpture or an installation? And then on the same level, is that, well, if something's being drawn, does it have to be made? Because actually now it's being drawn, exists in language, exists in knowledge, and I think for me the sketchbook is a place where

there are these small worlds, these small sort of like spaces that are continually changing and their place in their own right. Of course, I use things from the sketchbook and take them into larger scale works, whether that would be drawings, prints, sculpture, all sorts of embroideries, all of the different ways I work with my practice apart from the sketchbook.

But I do think it's very important as a sense of my private space. Also, for me at times one of my biggest dilemmas. Because actually sometimes getting out of the sketchbook is really tough because it's a really nice place. It's lovely and safe. It's warm. It's cozy. And actually sometimes you have to really sort of like wrench yourself away from the thing. There are periods where I do close it and I just don't engage with it because I just need to actually do something else. But what I've also developed is a way of working where I would very much like having multiple projects going on at the same time. So, you know, I mentioned exhibitions. I might be working on that particular body of work or I might be reviewing a body of work or curating bodies of work back together or currently I'm involved in a number of different embroideries that I'm working on, which are potentially going to be sort of I haven't decided where they're going to be shown yet. But this is something I'm hoping to work towards for maybe next year, probably 2022.

So, I think the sketchbook is a is a very specific place. It's a place that does connect to other places. It's not isolated, but it is somewhere at times that you have to be very clear why you're using it. And I think it can be a very self-indulgent place as well.





Again, back to that discussion around... I suppose magic or alchemy, this notion that you can make something out of nothing, there's the alchemic idea of Homunculi, or maybe led into gold. All of those things are key to my practice. I suppose the last place to end really would be to look at to think about the quote. Joshua Reynolds is very, very influential. He's 18th, 19th century painter, and he used a sketchbook all the time, but he used it very much as a tool to make larger paintings so he would go out. This is before Impressionism, before Constable, before Sargent, before these people were actually starting to think or Turner when they were actually drawing direct in nature. And that was the actual outcome. He was going out collecting things and then coming back to and then constructing figurative and landscape painting. And he famously said nothing comes from nothing. That's what he was referring to. He's referring to his sketchbook practice. So I think as an

educator, often I find myself talking to students about sketchbooks. And one of the first things I have to try and do is to actually get them to understand sketchbook is not something we invented because it's part of the examination criteria or because we're a bit worried they might go out in the evening. Oh, you know, so go dancing. So we've thought the sketchbook would be a great way of actually giving them more work to do. And actually that sense of sketchbook or some form of notation has always been part of art is practice and not just visual artists. Some amazing diaries with drawing and writing across the ages. I mean, look at some amazing intellectuals, look at some of the navigators and explorers. Someone like Magellan's diaries, for instance, are incredibly visual as well as written. But then also look at somebody like Frida Kahlo's diaries, where Frida Kahlo is working with both text and visualization and very personal as well.

Yeah, sorry about this. Again, a lot of information, I don't know how much sense is going to make after this (smiles).



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*Thanks to dear Gary to create this beautiful and inspiring talk for us. Apart from this shortened text version of the interview, there were more, more precious conversations at that time. You can also watch and listen the full interview through our Youtube page: "Light and Memory" /Thank you!*