

Interview between Rebecca Moss (RM) and Katharine Stout, Director Focal Point Gallery (KS)

7th June 2023

KS

Could we start by discussing your moving image work, which it's probably fair to say you are best known for. These are characterized by depicting seemingly spontaneous and even potentially dangerous actions. Could you tell us about how you get your initial idea and the process for making one of your video works?

RM

In these works, I'm interested in thinking about a relationship between my body and the landscape. I grew up in Essex, and when I was a teenager I used to feel much better if I went for walks in the landscape. I had quite a difficult time as a teenager, and I realized that I displaced whatever was upsetting me as I was walking. I'd imagine negative emotions passing out through the soles of my feet into the ground. I think that with my work, it's a similar process of trying to connect an emotional state, an emotional expression with something in the landscape by contriving a situation where things can tip one way or another.

My body becomes like another object in the landscape, I become part of the landscape and on an equal level to the natural world, props and architecture that I might be interacting with. So, I think my starting place for the videos is an emotional one.

KS

Do you storyboard what will happen? How do you work out the mechanics of setting things up?

RM

The honest answer is that these ideas pop into my head fully formed. I think my mind makes these subconscious connections between things. So as I'm going for walks anyway, I might notice a particular architectural structure that interests me, which on some level I'm mentally logging as something that I could potentially respond to. Or it could be something like the natural rhythm of the tides going in and out, that movement.

Movement is a really important thing for me, and things not feeling static. I have an ongoing process of going for walks and paying attention to things, but I don't storyboard or anything like that. It's more that I bring these two elements, myself and the landscape, into collision in some way, and seeing what happens. I can usually imagine what outcome I want to happen, but sometimes the elements of surprise and disappointment can make for stronger work. So I'm up for embracing the element of chance. I put myself in the same position as the viewer when they watch my work in that I don't quite know what's going to happen in those scenarios - I think that's really important to relinquish some element of control.

KS

Have you got an example of a work that was the result of a happy accident?

RM

Definitely. It's not in the show, but there was a work called *Low Tide Fountain*, where I set up a Super Soaker water pistol so that it would be triggered by the tide as it went out. There was a brick on a float, attached to a string tied around the trigger of the pistol. As the tide went out, the mechanism was going to be activated and I imagined that there would be this amazing shot of water, but instead this pathetic little dribble came out. I realised that this said a lot more as an artwork than if the shot out was really spectacular. Something a bit underwhelming could also be strong and interesting.

KS

Having reviewed all your videos to make the selection for this exhibition, I wonder if you could draw out a bit more what you think the common themes and shared interests are in your approach and subject matter?

RM

I've selected videos where I was interested in pulling out spatial and architectural qualities as part of this opportunity at Focal Point Gallery. We're using projectors and I think it was really interesting to think about how these could be presented together in a way that emphasises the qualities of scale. I think the works that I've gone for emphasise sudden bursts of energy. Gravity is a common theme as well. For example, some of the videos that we've selected involve things dropping from a height, so an important part of the mechanism is activated by gravity. And that's something that I've been thinking about a lot as well, this sense of a downward pulling, a downward motion that activates things. That's what led the selection, and my thinking for it.

KS

That's interesting, because I think what we're hoping in this presentation is to accentuate the viewer being an active participant. At least one of the videos has a one-to-one scale, and for the viewer, their senses might also respond to a surprise element, for example a splash or a sudden sound. We're doing this interview before the exhibition opens, but I wonder if there's anything about seeing your videos presented in that way that makes you think about what you might want to make in the future?

RM

Between the videos and the ice creams, I've been thinking about how I can approach my work in relation to the idea of intervention, interruption and surprise – for example architecturally, spatially, acoustically. This could be with moving image, or it could be with sculpture, or installation.

KS

The ice-cream work you refer to is called *Sky Drop* which is presented in the Window Gallery, which is a space that we have talked about over the last few months. People can see into it 24/7, and there is the experience of seeing the work from inside the gallery as well. The work touches upon things that you're exploring in this exhibition, such as precarity. I know that you have thought a lot about the location of Focal Point Gallery and you're very familiar with Southend. Could you say a bit more about this installation, and what you're considering. I also know that people are fascinated by the objects of the ice creams themselves, and how you acquired them.

RM

This work comes from bringing together two experiences of culture that I feel that I've experienced in Southend. I grew up going on holiday to British seaside resorts, and it's the

same culture that you find across these different places. My family didn't go abroad on holiday. I really wanted to bring an element of that into Focal Point Gallery and bring together these two worlds which sit right next to each other. I found it very exciting. What would happen if I just brought an element of the seafront quite literally into the art gallery. What that would feel like, and what that would do. The ice creams were found on Ebay and Facebook marketplace. I went and collected them from a variety of mainly seaside resorts around the UK, quite a few came from Blackpool and Devon. I mean, Ebay and Facebook marketplace are like the Wild West, you can't really predict what you're going to find!

I wanted to connect a sense of precarity and the context of Focal Point Gallery and Southend geographically, down in the South-eastern tip of Essex. In my video work I am drawn to tidal locations. Many places change with the fluctuating tides, so I'm always interested in the idea of an edge, where the land meets the sea - in this case the land meets the river Thames. Southend is a place on the edge for me. That's how I imagine it. I wanted to make an installation that would repurpose objects which are built for display. These are display objects, and the window gallery is an art space and it's also a display space. I remember you mentioned the word tableau in our discussions, it's a place for a tableau to be created that connects to the main gallery space, and it's quite specific. So I wanted to build something that would emphasize the sense of precarity, and bring together these two expressions of culture within Southend, as something I'm thinking about now.

KS

The objects and how you're presenting them in a stage of falling have a dual resonance. They have a strong symbolism of English seaside resort culture, but also they are at the end of their life as display objects. Yet people clearly don't want to just throw them away, because they're still impressive objects – this relates to our last exhibition by Liz Magor, who also 'repurposes' objects at the end of their functional lives. They're very strong iconographic objects, and they also look a bit tired and a bit sad. The notion of the ice cream splatting is funny, but it's also sad, particularly for the child that it's happened to.

RM

There's something quite tragic about some of them. Some of them are really in such a state it's remarkable that they found another home, you know they were destined for landfill. They've clearly been exposed to the elements which I'm really interested in. Going forward, using found materials and weathered materials is something I'm thinking about - what the surface can express when it has this weathered quality, especially when it's been exposed to sea water. It's also building on something that I already do in the videos which is to use found objects, found furniture, found props.

In a time of ecological instability and mass production and fast fashion, I think there's something important about looking at the objects we already have. To make the splatted ice creams, I dropped them from a height. It felt important to bring that element of performance, movement and energy into the sculptures, because it's about a certain relinquishing of control and that connects back to the videos. I think that is a common theme across all three presentations actually, this idea of losing an element of control, and the kind of unpredictability of the world meeting me somewhere in the middle.

KS

I think it became a conscious decision to use upcycled materials, which aligns with our own sense of environmental responsibility at FPG. That also leads us neatly onto talking about your project *23 Days at Sea*, which was an extraordinary real-life project. The way it happened was entirely reactive to external circumstance, over which you had no control. It's the first time that this piece has been presented in England, though it was seen in Venice as part of the Future Generation Prize, wasn't it?

RM

Yes, I showed the video work *International Waters* in Venice. At Focal Point Gallery, this will be the project's first presentation in the UK.

KS

So now that you've been looking back at all of the archive material, I wondered what your reflections are on this work, and how it relates to your wider practice.

RM

What's been good is a certain amount of time has passed which enables me to see things more clearly and think about this situation. Going back to what I was saying earlier, I think I'm always looking for forms that in some way express a sense of movement and instability and precarity. Being stuck on a great big boat off the coast of Japan, a big old rusty boat that's got thousands of containers on it, and none of them are going anywhere is something that I'll always remember and think about.

This element of getting stuck - we haven't really mentioned slapstick yet, but there's a lot I draw upon from slapstick performance for my ideas. There's this particular trope in slapstick of getting one's head stuck between railings. I think the physicality of getting stuck interests me a lot, and it really connects to the container ship situation. What it felt like to be stuck and the humour of that, but also the anxiety I experienced is something that I've been processing. It's going to be great to see it in its entirety, to bring some of my memories of that experience into the gallery space and to share it with people. It's really exciting.

KS

It's interesting to use the word 'stuck' actually, as I think that's a good way of describing a mental state of anxiety if you feel stuck in the situation that you're in. As you described at the beginning, capturing an emotional experience and transmitting that through a physical presentation is very much at the heart of your work.

RM

Absolutely. I think the role of humour and the way it interacts with something darker or more serious, is something that I'm interested in across the three spaces. With the containership situation, I was naturally very anxious and worried about what would happen - I was receiving emails like one from a marine lawyer who advised that the only way that I could get off the ship quickly would be to feign illness. This was a real-life crisis essentially. I had to walk around the ship with my arm in the air to find signal, but eventually I would find some, and my friends were sending me messages that were very humorous. Being able to laugh at a difficult situation, and how humour functions in that moment, is something that I'm thinking about a lot, also in the performance videos and the ice cream installation.

KS

What comedy are you influenced by? What do you think successfully achieves that tension that you're describing.

RM

Buster Keaton.

KS

For our younger audiences, or anyone who might not know Buster Keaton, why don't you give an example. What do you think is the best film he's done?

RM

There's one where he moves into a new house with his wife. Lots of things go wrong within the house, it misbehaves in a variety of ways, and he messes up the renovation of the house. It's all just brilliant. Laurel and Hardy as well. Slapstick is a very physical form of performance. The scenes are quite low brow, but actually they are very conceptual, and precise. To be able to choreograph a sequence, and to repeat that sequence until you get something that looks spontaneous and not contrived, is really interesting.

KS

I think that's interesting in relation to video making, because that genre emerged very early in the history of the moving image and cinema.

Buster Keaton's films don't have any spoken word. Someone played the piano live in the Picture house to accompany captions on the film. Laurel & Hardy was not long after and carried on that tradition. Your interest to express what you're trying to communicate very physically is inherent to that time of filmmaking.

RM

Definitely. That kind of comedy is nonverbal performance, and as you say it's very expressive, very powerful. With my work, I would connect it to feminist performance as well emphasizing the body and connecting that to the landscape, but in a body that is not heroic and has historically and culturally been aligned more with the natural world, according to ecofeminist thinking. I just wanted to add that as important, because women are often overlooked in discussions around slapstick comedy. If you go back to very early cinema, there are actually a surprising number of slapstick performances by women at a time when this medium was very new and experimental – I made a film programme of these for Jerwood Staging Series in 2019.

KS

It's also relative to the history of filmmaking that women actors often play a secondary role rather than the main role. And yet, probably they're key to creating that scene. Could you say something about the works you've selected with Ines Costa for the Associate Programme for the Big Screen Southend?

RM

I'm showing three videos. They're all very short, and there is often an element of closeup, as I was quite interested in showing something quite small on the massive screen outside. There's one where my foot is disguised as a mouse. It comes across the screen and my

toe/the mouse's nose attempts to grab a little piece of cheese off a mouse trap. It's a close-up performance made huge on the Big Screen Southend.

I've also invited Wood and Harrison to show some recent work. I love their videos, so it's a real privilege and honour to be able to show their work outside my show. The work we're screening is called *101 Reasons to Stand Somewhere* and involves them performing many different reasons why one could stand in a place! It's very humorous; it's spatial, it's arresting, and there's a directness to it as well. Then there's Emma Hart's work which is called *Dice*. It was the first video that I saw of Emma's when I was in my second year of my BA at Camberwell and I remember seeing this video in a lecture - I just thought it was brilliant. I thought it was really poetic, and accessible, I could really connect to it. When I worked with Emma for the 'Poor Things' exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery, this work popped back into my head and I thought it would be really brilliant to bring it into this exhibition. It has a sense of immediacy, and playfulness as well to it. Then the third work is by Esther Ferrer, who Ines has recommended, and it involves the artist performing a series of facial expressions. It's really funny. It's a deadpan performance of something ridiculous, which I think is going to work really well in that context too.

KS

You called the exhibition 'Unstable Condition', and I wondered if you could say something about that title and what it means to title a show?

RM

I think that with shows, they are never an end point. They're always a moment when you bring together a certain kind of process or thinking to consolidate it, and then you think forwards from that. I think this exhibition brings together a sense in which I've felt unstable in many elements of my life for a very long while. It just felt like the right title. I think it's important to say also that we're living in a time of 'perma-crisis.' Living in this time of perma-crisis as an artist, I want to make work that isn't just about me and my experiences. I want to think more broadly about the world that we're living in and respond to it. And think about how arts and artists can respond to it, to shape the future as well, and imagine new possibilities. This was an opportunity to really think about this context, thinking about what it means to show and talk about this in a time when there's rolling news of one disaster after the next.

KS

That leads onto the final question. I know you've been very focused on this exhibition which represents a coming together of ten years of your practice. But do you have any ideas for what you want to focus on next?

RM

I have realised that I really want to keep my mind open to the different outcomes my work could take, drawing on my interests in the art intervention, slapstick performance and unstable and precarious forms. The show at Focal Point Gallery combines different mediums and materials. I have always used and repurposed found objects in my videos, but in this show I've been able to think more about the sculptural possibilities of using reclaimed objects to imagine new possibilities for the future.

I would also love to work more in the public realm. The window space overlooks a square with lots of people walking past, and I would love to do more projects that occupy surprising spaces.

KS

Thank you.