



Liberty



You are invited
to the preview on:

Saturday 19th September 2.00 – 4.00pm

Refreshments provided

Free admission

Artist present

RSVP: alyson.evans@bradford.gov.uk

Cliffe Castle Museum
Spring Gardens Lane
Keighley BD20 6LH
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Front cover image: Goldrosette



Others

SHEILA GAFFNEY

19th September 2009 – 10th January 2010
Cliffe Castle Museum, Keighley



Micklethwaite



Smock



Sheila Gaffney: Material Memories

This exhibition is the result of a residency by the artist at Cliffe Castle and part of an ongoing body of work that explores the way in which memories might be made tangible. The title of the exhibition refers to the 'Others' whose lives have been part of the objects in the collection and the manner in which the artist, as outsider or meddler, is able to draw out these roles. Visitors to this museum, as with any museum, ask questions of the collections; an artist similarly asks questions but perhaps has the liberty to push these further and with the artistic skills to proffer some responses. What we are presented with in this exhibition is the result of an engagement with different materials in order to evoke something which is not immediately present, something which will resonate with our own memories. This struggle to evoke the ephemeral, without pinning it down, makes the work at once engaging and elusive.

In a fascinating study by Maura Banim and Ali Guy titled 'Why do women keep clothes they no longer wear' women were interviewed about their relationship with clothes. It gives a particularly interesting insight into those clothes which are no longer worn but kept for sentimental reasons, not just the wedding dress or child's first shoes but those which evoke certain associations which remain too strong for the owner to simply throw away. The materiality of clothes outlives their practical use, beyond the time when they suited or physically fitted their owner.

These clothes have stories to tell, not in a narrative sense but in what we could describe as an 'immaterial' sense, something which is closer to smell.¹ When a woollen jumper or cardigan gets wet in the rain and then begins to dry through the heat of the body it gives off a pungent, almost palpable aroma. When a dress moves, like the one Sheila Gaffney shows in *Jean Allen*, it has a distinctive sound – the touch of fabric on fabric, the sound of the folds moving. The tactile properties of garments are highlighted both in the crisp details of many of the images and the technique of wax casting used on the pink child's cardigan in the sculpture *I saw what you did...*. This installation piece places Sheila Gaffney's images from the Cliffe Castle residency within a wider context of both her work and the issues with which she is dealing. Here, the absent body is replaced by the playfully dancing projection from inside the cast, whilst the oversized plinth holds the audience back from the tiny figure. The figure is rendered untouchable for the audience, who strain to make discernible the projected snippets of visualised memories, caught on cine film by anonymous respondents to an advert placed in the *Yorkshire Post*.

As an artist in residence at Cliffe Castle, Sheila Gaffney has been given access to areas of the collection which are not currently on display. Clichéd metaphors of the treasure trove, box of wonders or 'Aladdin's cave' spring immediately to mind, but such an opportunity offers not only the enticement of endless possibilities but also the risk of becoming lost in labyrinthine indecision, or methodically aping the processes of the museum curator only to emerge overwhelmed and exhausted. It is perhaps due to her previous experience of working in archives and museums – a collaborative installation at Leeds City Art Gallery in 1994 and her subtle interventions in the library and archives of the Henry Moore Institute, also in Leeds, in 2003 – that she was able to follow a route, like Ariadne's thread, through the Cliffe Castle collections.² However, when she described to me the size of the clothing and costume archive, I did get a sense of the panic that such an extensive collection might provoke in someone who is not a curator, who has not devised a system to organise and categorise the multiplicity of different pieces of clothing donated or purchased over the last one hundred and twenty years.

The collection has been amassed in an attempt to archive the types of clothing that local people have worn, it is not just fine or expensive costumes, but includes nylon dresses from C & A and the hand-knitted woolly hats that you might wear stuffed at the back of your wardrobe, or may still wear or even knit yourself. Respondents to Banim and Guy's research into the clothes kept at the back of the wardrobe included those given as gifts, often never worn, but which could not be thrown out because they had been given, and were therefore part of a social system of exchange that is alien to the 'value' clothing sold cheaply today in Primark. One respondent, is quoted: 'This drawer is full of things my mother has knitted.... Where do you put the things that your mother knit but you didn't wear?'.³ It was a similar sense of the familiar which guided Sheila Gaffney in her search and selection of clothes from the collection and it is this familiarity which could be a way into the work.

How Gaffney selected the garments to work with was through touch: she describes 'riffing' through the rows of the stored clothes. I imagine the subconscious way in which people handle clothes when shopping, testing them through finger and thumb in a process which seemingly bypasses any laboured, conscious process of analysing fabric – before you check the label to see if it is 'hand wash only'. This tactile process is sometimes theorised as 'haptic', the process by which touch triggers associations and messages. But the artist's selection is not based on finding clothes to be worn but deliberately attempts to tap into the past. Gaffney describes that she was looking for

'things I might have worn when I was a girl, or that I might have stood next to someone wearing'. It is a personal search, but not simply autobiographical: the generic nature of much clothing, particularly that which is mass produced, means that the same garments can be recognised by whole sections of the population – not necessarily visually or consciously, but in a manner which is felt. Here we return to the idea that these two dimensional, digitally produced images are attempting to capture more than a visual resemblance of something from the past: they attempt to embody the objects with a different sense, one we might call 'presence'.

'Presence' is a word with many connotations; its use is often avoided because of the ambiguity of its meaning, yet it seems right to use 'presence' in relation to these images as they themselves play self-consciously with spiritual overtones.⁴ This connotation is also encouraged both by the title of the exhibition and the long association that Keighley has with the spiritualist movement as Daru Rooke, Cliffe Castle Museum Manager, informed me. In 1853 Keighley became its first UK home and members have been meeting at the Heber Street Church since 1895. The flame-like effects which the images show clearly reference this interest in accepting the spiritual into our present lives and the broader suggestion of accessing past lives. However, it is not so much the lives of the clothes' former inhabitants that these 'flames' represent but rather the memory that is held within their fabric. Therefore, it is significant that these effects of light were discovered by the artist serendipitously, and subsequently recreated following a refinement of the initial accidental effects. At times these 'flames' suggest bodies in the process of absenting themselves.

When art critics talk of drawings made by sculptors there is often the claim that they contain a particular spatial awareness, but it is not always borne out by the drawings themselves. However, the fact that Sheila Gaffney is a sculptor, that her work is physical, is worth noting in relation to the way in which she has approached her subject matter for this exhibition. I would argue that it is relevant and appropriate to be reminded of the way in which Gaffney has physically handled the clothes in order to make these images. The traditional distance between painter and model, between photographer and subject has been minimised through the use of a computer and scanner. The French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, argued that the perception of phenomena relies on our bodily interaction with the world; similarly the method used by Gaffney in her scannograms does not approach the clothes as visual objects but as physical, textured entities, not only when being selected but also when being squashed, turned, pressed and lifted onto the flatbed

scanner – a piece of equipment that cannot record the whole garment, in the way that a camera can zoom in and out to crop or reveal. The physical proximity of the object to the tool, which makes an image of its physical presence in a particular space, is key to how these images work differently from photographs. The scanner moves slowly across the garment and the image unfolds through a process which is closer to that of drawing, reminiscent of the studies of folds in drapery which were once integral to an artist's training. Some of that proximity comes from the sense of the fragmentary; even when the whole garment is presented, as in the pink undergarment of *Liberty*, it is not flattened out in an attempt to record accurately its cut and pattern, but rather it is suspended as though in a different space which is not from the present; it hangs as though suspended in time. As viewers we are led into the interior of the garment, asked to imagine how the body feels as it enters the garment – it's as though you are stepping into it to pull it on, but without the hands to hold the straps. It is our foot which might gingerly be entering the folds of silken fabric whilst touching the supporting structure of the underwear's casing, which belies its title: *Liberty*.

Liberty is one of the few images where the museum tags are evident: visually they offer another anchor in this strange image, reinforcing the simultaneous existence of the piece as both record and residue, of a past and a present at the same time. These tags act as the stamp of the collection, they include the SHIC numbers by which they gain entry to an internationally recognised system of codification – the Social History Identification Catalogue. The corresponding details of each item used by Gaffney for this exhibition has been recorded by Dale Keeton, the Collections Officer – Social History, but these identification tags are not there for the individual curator, who is the current incumbent, but for future curators who continue to care for the collection. The title curator shares the same Latin origin as that of the religious role of curate – cura – to care. One cares for objects, the other for souls. The residency which Sheila Gaffney has undertaken has not been that of the curator caring for the collection, yet the intervention of the artist, as 'other' to the systematic care of the curator, is similarly concerned with the continuation, and evocation, of the memories which this material holds.

Christopher Bamford
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¹ The reference here is to the exhibition organised by J-F Lyotard in Paris in 1985 titled *Les Immatériaux* [The Immaterials] which emphasised the sonar and olfactory senses, in addition to the visual.

² Sheila Gaffney & Linda Schwab, *Wunderkammer – the female gaze objectified*, Leeds City Art Gallery, March-April 1994; Sheila Gaffney, *footNOTES*, Henry Moore Institute Library, Leeds, 2003.

³ Quoted in Guy, Green & Banim (2001) *Through the Wardrobe: Women's Relationship with Their Clothes*, Oxford, Berg. P:208

⁴ I am thinking in particular of the attempts to rehabilitate the term made by Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht in his 2005 book *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* which draws on the work of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy.



Redcardi

Jean Allen