

Laura Ford interviewed by David Lomas

This is a transcript of a talk by Laura Ford and her interview with David Lomas, both of which took place at the Manchester Art Gallery on May 5, 2004. At the time, Ford's work was shown in the group exhibition *Disguise* at Manchester Art Gallery (12 February - 6 June 2004). The exhibition included surrealist photographs by Claude Cahun and works by several contemporary visual artists, including Cindy Sherman, related to themes of disguise and masquerade. The interview was transcribed by Kerry Cundiff.

Talk

Laura Ford: I have brought along a few slides to give you an idea of the range of my work and how it has developed.



God Pot (1992) was the beginnings of the kind of work that I am doing at the moment. It was installed in the dungeon of Nottingham Castle Museum. As you went down the steps of the castle and your eyes became adjusted to the light you then saw these figures: six little bears dressed in pyjamas made of dressing gown fabric, which look like they want to be picked up. And amongst them are all these cringing and bonking rabbits like moulds for making jelly or blancmange for parties. So it starts to feel like a horrible dream, these things

which are completely in the wrong place - displaced. You have this dark space and these soft night-time creatures that look like you would want to cuddle them but they are kind of revolting at the same time. So just at the point where you feel drawn to them you also think: well, no thank you.



Summer Lightning (1992) was an exhibition of eight women artists in the Seamans Hospital, Greenwich. In the past the hospital had been used for treating sailors returning from overseas for venereal infections or tropical diseases. I called my section of the show *Any Port In a Storm* and I entirely covered the parquet floors of two wards with tattoos of possible sexual encounters that these sailors might have had. There are all kinds of permutations, as you can see. It was my little intervention into an exclusively male preserve.





This is one of the first showings of *Bang Bang* (1996). There are actually two of them as you will see. Initially, I made these for a show at the Royal Festival Hall which is a very large space sub-divided in mixed exhibitions with these rather glamorous big screens. I wanted to make use of the screen along with these two figures who look like little art terrorists who are disrupting the show. When I have been in group shows I always feel that my work never sits comfortably - although it does fare better upstairs at Manchester Art Gallery - so I decided on that occasion to make something about that, and that was also quite playful.



Stump Girl (1996) is located in a forest on the Chiltern sculpture trail. I was commissioned to make the piece though I don't like sculpture trails very much. So I ended up making something that was pretending not to be there and was almost a little bit embarrassed. The shoes are the giveaway or so she thinks.



Elephant Boy (1999) is the first of my elephant boys. It was shown at Wolsey Art Gallery, Ipswich, which has separate rooms decorated in Victorian and Edwardian period style. He tries to stand unobtrusively in the corner.





This was a collaborative installation at Camden Arts Centre, London (1998) that I made with the artist Jacqueline Poncelet. Her work uses postcards which are then repeated and repeated to make these amazing patterned walls. We took over the white gallery space and almost tiled all the walls, changing it entirely and within that I placed these animals which were in a way domesticised by the space and by her intervention. They look like soft toys but are very large: you can walk underneath the belly of the giraffe.



The *Chintz Girls* (1998) were also exhibited at Camden. We installed a

chimney breast and a fireplace to make the space like a sitting room. Jacqui made a floor from laminated cork tiles with a very busy pattern on it - lots of bicycles. It was actually a shot taken from one of her travels in India, repeated over and over. It starts to look like a Persian carpet. The *Chintz Girls* - there were seven of them originally - each have their own little individual mat as well. It is almost like there was pattern on pattern on pattern on pattern in this show. We wanted it to feel like an overload of sensory information that was very unsettling for the viewer. The whole sensation of looking was quite disorientating and generated a sickly, almost suffocating feeling. The girls came about from taking my eldest child, who was quite little at the time, to ballet classes and watching these other little middle-class kids and their un-questioning view of the world. The work was my reaction to a claustrophobic world of middle-class propriety.



This is the next elephant boy. It is called *Out in the Cold* and it is really using up all the junk that needed chucking out of our drawers in the studios. I made a little outfit and then there was an old chair that



needed chucking out and old blankets, old duvets, old sleeping bags. It came about from taking my children to and from school, seeing lots of homeless people and also from reading a book about Scott (the Antarctic explorer) and *The Birthday Boys*, Beryl Bainbridge's novel based on Scott's expedition. My middle son was then about five or six years old and he had a kind of single-minded determination and an idea of himself as being a heroic figure. So it was a combination of all of those things that were happening at the time.



This is my five-legged *Donkey* (2000). He actually came from a dream I had when I was about five years old and had pneumonia and he keeps cropping up again, this five-legged donkey, like a pantomime character.



This is another Scott figure. When the *Chintz Girls* went on tour with the British Art Show they had these beautiful crates made for them which were just spectacular. It probably would have cost as much to make the crates as it would to make the girls and I thought that for the next show, which was a commercial show, I should include the crates as part of the work, so that you bought the work and you got the crate as well. So that is how it started out, but obviously it became more and was about carrying your home on your back.



Look at Me Now (2001) was a figure that came from an old photograph of the opening ceremony at a Winter Olympics, a beautiful picture of a child skating



gracefully in a 1950s-type outfit. I made her and stood her up and was thinking about how to complete the sculpture when I went upstairs, probably to make supper, and heard a loud crash. I came down and there she was and I thought I don't have to work on it any more: that is how she should be.



This is called *Kipper* (2001) and it was part of the same show.



The Great Indoors (2002) was a show that I made for a museum in Salamanca, Spain. There were these five oversized stags with spreading antlers that became like treescapes filling the space. And the bodies I was thinking are sort of like hedges so as you physically encounter them it would be like looking over a hedge.

They were quite static, and then beneath those figures were again these Scott-type figures marching through. I will show some other images of that show later on because as it went on it developed and I added a couple of other figures.



This is the next show in the same commercial space (Houldsworth). It can be difficult making work for commercial spaces in that they are not neutral, they are primarily intended for selling the work. So I wanted to address that aspect in the work and also tackle what was slightly taboo using ceramics and textiles. When you use ceramics it confuses everybody: is it proper fine art or a little bit naff to be using stoneware? I also wanted to include the glamorous display shelves that you see in commercial galleries. I remember at Interim Art, Maureen Paley who was super-cool always had these beautiful shelves with invisible fixings and I wanted to combine that with something completely frumpy and exhausted-looking. So you had these donkeys that just looked like they didn't want to have an argument about whether to use a plinth or not; they



needed one, and so you have this great big heavy head and these exhausted compliant bodies as well that go with them.



This is a group show in London at the moment at Beaconsfield Gallery [*Engineer, Part Three: Laura Ford*, 21 January 2004 - 30 May 2004]. The gallery space is an old school where children from very poor families were educated and then many of them were put on to ships to load cannons. So it is a building that is seeped in history. The exhibition consists of five women artists who will be shown in sequence. It is a rolling show that gradually evolves with each artist building on the others' work. What I have made is probably about eleven little figures, the size of my three year old, which are a weird cross between suicide bombers and the Morris dancers and they inhabit the space alongside a very large bearded lady (below). They have these bomb belts and bells and the lady has these medals which are actually buttons, so they are like self-awarded medals really. I feel it is me at six o'clock when the phone rings and I am

trying to get the food on, desperate for the children to go to bed! There are a lot of references to, I suppose, different kinds of terrorist organisations and also to Morris dancers. There are figures climbing up into the roof off long ropes and also climbing up into the structure as well.



The figure in the corner which is called *Beuys Boy* (below) is a forerunner of the pieces that are in the entrance at Manchester Art Gallery. He is a very sad-looking, but vaguely heroic army boy with a pretend military costume with lots of references to Joseph Beuys. They are kind of mock heroic references.





Interview

David Lomas: Laura, it seems to me that the theme of this exhibition, *Disguise*, connects with some quite fundamental and longstanding preoccupations of your work that it would be interesting for us to explore - taking up on some of the points that you have made. I found it helpful to see the original environments in which some of the figures in the show were exhibited and to learn that, in some cases, they were actually made to be part of quite complex installations. For instance, the piece *Bang Bang*: to see that in its original context of a white-walled gallery space, the archetypal white cube, it makes much more sense as a kind of art terrorist where it is camouflaged against its modernist surroundings.

Laura Ford: Though it's funny how these things happen because that little figure slowly mutated into the form that you see. My original idea was that it would be part

of an installation that was totally loony. I spent probably about a year and a half making it with these very large canvases. If you can remember those things you used to see in the back of cars with suckers - little animals that stared at you with a surprised expression from the back window of cars - I painted those with very large penises or little penises and as though the front of the canvas was a piece of glass. There were hundreds and hundreds of them. I was going to fill a gallery full of these painted animals, all hung like at the Royal Academy. So you saw this little figure with a gun just outside the space and as you went in there was a whole room full of these paintings that started looking like targets. So you have these eyes, these penises, these suckers, all could be potential targets ... and nobody would show it! What was interesting was that *Bang Bang!* came out of it, so it was a long route round to that intense little object.

DL: Yes, there is a topical, contentious and risky aspect to work in the show - especially when one thinks of the images that have been appearing on the front pages of newspapers over the past week of hooded Iraqi prisoners - that I want to come back to. First of all, though, I want to ask you about the role of children in your work because it seems that very often, even if one is dealing with deadly serious adult issues, it is children who are the main protagonists.

LF: I think it is so that you partly have some sort of empathy for them and there



is a protective reaction that comes in to play when you are looking at it. Then, thinking of the donkey boys, it is almost like they are little men. Sometimes you see little boys and you know the man that they're going to become, so they are the same thing, the child and the old man.

DL: It is not at all a sentimentalised view of childhood. Does it draw upon your own childhood memories, or your experiences as a parent?

LF: Well, it is a mixture of both. When people look at my work, they imagine that I must have had an awful childhood, but it wasn't. It was actually quite idyllic. Though I do remember moments when I would be sitting at the table with my mum and she would be just drinking a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette and suddenly I would think: the world is not at all as it seems. I was telling you earlier about a book I was reading where two little boys discover that one of their mothers was a spy for the Germans during the Second World War. This idea of another life that these children are protected from but that suddenly opens in front of them, with your parents having an unfamiliar existence apart from you, I think that quite often my work refers back to that sense of uncanniness. It is very odd when you are looking at somebody who you know, or perhaps your own child, and then suddenly there is a moment where it all changes and you think, 'I don't know you at all' and that is very scary.

DL: You draw on the enjoyment that children have dressing up and assuming adult masks?

LF: Yes, and play as a way of testing and trying out different roles.

DL: Your experiences as a child at fairground and the circus, how does that influence you?

LF: I was brought up on a fairground and travelled around a lot when I was young - the fairground shows were still about in those days. It was funny because the other day I was talking to my uncle and going over all the things that we remembered and I thought, thank goodness for that, because I had not just imagined them after all! There was a woman painted entirely in gold who would sit like a statue in a glass case full of rats. Afterwards she would come and get chips from my grandfather in her hair rollers. I think memories like that have influenced me quite a lot. There was also a tableau of Frankenstein that was always my and my grandmother's favourite where we would go and see what looked like a wonderful sculpture within a whole environment, and you would sit looking at it for a while, then just at the right moment he came alive and he would get up and chase you out of the booth. Even though we knew that he was alive and that he would do that there was always that sweet moment of terror. I think a lot of my sculptures do that, or I would hope they do: you are looking at them and questioning whether they are going to



come alive. You know they really aren't, but...

DL: I think that is where the installation element seems especially crucial: walking amongst the figures memories and associations are triggered, and they in a sense come alive. For instance, the animals and the donkeys that you showed remind me in some sense of pantomime: there is always the idea of a person concealed within.

LF: I was also very interested, especially in some earlier works that I have not shown, in the idea of being able to look at something and I just felt a little bit sorry for the sculpture. It was like it *wanted* to be looked at but at the same time it sort of collapsed in embarrassment when you stared at it. That was what I was interested in - and I think there is still something of that in the sculptures I make. They all have that reserve.

DL: A striking aspect is that they have no eyes; it is as if they are all either masked or blindfolded. Paradoxically that seems to make our engagement with them all the more intense. What prompted your decision to do that?

LF: The minute I started putting eyes on the figures I found a narrative taking over; your relationship with them somehow changed. Whereas, it is what I was talking about - where you thought you knew someone and suddenly you don't know them - it allows for that kind of gap, when they don't have eyes.

DL: Yes, I find that it makes them all the more effective - a blank canvas that you can project on to. I also think that the play with scale is connected with their effectiveness, in a sense, casting you as a viewer back into a kind of childhood position in relation to these figures that tower over you in some cases.

LF: Yes, and with the antlers you are ducking down and around them so it feels like you are moving through a forest. I think they make you *not* look at the work as you ordinarily would look at a sculpture. You meander through the whole thing and experience it as a whole rather than just one object after another.

Audience: Could you tell us about the materials you use to make the sculptures?

LF: They are made with metal armatures. Inside the larger animals is a scaffolding covered with a material called Jesmonite which I also use with fibre glass matting. And then I dress them. The antlers are made of bits of old cuts of leather, canvas and lots of wool. I used to go to fabric warehouse sales where designers would get rid of all their fabric and I would just go and buy up huge amounts and quite often an idea would come to me from just having that particular bit of wool or whatever lying about.

DL: The craft element does seem to be integral to your work. You mostly avoid using conventional sculptural materials, why is that?



LF: It started out when I had a year travelling in India. I had always been particularly keen on Indian sculpture, but seeing it in museums in Britain they were immaculate and undressed. Whereas in India you would find little saris on them or bits of fabric or ghee or pigment. And suddenly these wonderful things came alive. They looked like somebody loved them, they looked like somebody was looking after them and had invested them with life. So when I began making sculpture again, it started involving other materials and fabrics.

DL: You mentioned, at one point, that the piece called *Beuys Boy* was gently mocking a heroic idea of the artist represented by Joseph Beuys. Is that connected at all with your choice of materials? Beuys of course used felt as a signature material.

LF: Yes, all of the materials that I was using were referencing Beuys. I am a real sucker for those heroic sculptors and all of those heroic figures, like Scott. In a sense, I would love life to be as simple as that: struggling against the elements and getting to the pole even though someone had got there before you. To have a mission, how great to have a mission! There is this ambivalence: I love it but at the same time it seems completely daft.

DL: I was wondering if there is a deliberate attempt through the use of fabrics, knitting and stitching and so forth,

to reference a feminist tradition or a feminist revaluation of women's work?

LF: It came about at a time when, if you were an artist of any credibility, you sent your work out to get fabricated. You should not make it yourself nor touch it and it should look immaculate and super well-made. I found that incredibly unappealing. My use of fabric and other materials came out of a feminist critique but it was more a criticism of what was happening in the art world, I think, at the time...It was a slightly taboo thing to be doing. I suppose that if handicrafts ever come back in I might just start making something immaculate because I do have that sort of personality.

DL: We talked about the 1980s and the revival of interest in soft sculpture and the use of unconventional materials.

LF: Yes, everything is understated and quite formal really.

DL: As an art historian who works on surrealism, I wondered whether there was perhaps a connection with someone like Eileen Agar, the English surrealist. Her piece at Tate Modern, *Angel of Anarchy*, is similarly blindfolded like some of your figures and incorporates lots of different fabrics. Do you recognise a connection with surrealism at all?

LF: I do, but I never do so very consciously. We all have those images in our head and obviously surrealism was an interest to me, but I cannot say that I



directly connected. In terms of a relationship with surrealism, Cocteau is somebody who I was very influenced by. I wrote my thesis on his film *Death of a Poet*, that and *Orpheus*. I loved the dramatisation of himself as an outsider and the fantastic other worlds that he created in the films.

DL: The role of fantasy and the dream you already mentioned: in the case of one or two pieces you said that a dream image had actually served as the starting point. That struck me as a point of connection with surrealism. Also the element of humour. A slightly mocking, subversive humour seems to be a pervasive feature of your work.

LF: Yes, I think because it keeps turning things around, the humour. You think you have got it and then it turns it around. Just thinking of somebody like David Lynch - I went completely mad on his films as well - I think it is the sense of something being completely absurd but at the same time you recognise it as having an emotional truth. It can be something quite disturbing or painful even.

DL: To my mind it is a distinctive aspect of the work that it provokes quite unsettling emotions, and the vision of childhood, as we said before, is not at all a rosy or comforting one. What is the viewer meant to do with all those disturbing emotions and reactions?

LF: I don't know! When Annie Griffin and I were doing performance pieces together

we often talked about how to make things that address uncomfortable issues and feelings that are ugly or unpleasant without completely alienating people or making them switch off. When I have seen a good film, one of David Lynch's for example, what I like about it is that I don't necessarily understand it or take it in completely. That happens over days, months, or years. Then things about the film will reemerge and I can bring them into my understanding of the world and my experience of the world bit by bit. You can continue recalling visual details, very intensely visual, and hold them so that when you have an experience you think it's just like that moment when Bob comes in *Twin Peaks*...I think that is when things are useful and that is what I would like people to take away with them from my sculptures. You might not necessarily like them but maybe they work on you over time.

DL: Do you find yourself working through emotions and ideas as you are making the pieces because I guess that physically making them takes a long time?

LF: Yes it does, and I do work on them quite intuitively. So I will know the general area that I am working on, what I think I am up to...and then it will shift and it is quite a scary place to be. You keep wanting to bring it back to where you know what you are doing - this is about this - but actually to do that is counter-productive because it then stops things from evolving.



DL: I like the way that ideas and associations gradually accrue to these objects as you are making them.

LF: Yes and often they cancel each other out as well and I think that is quite important in the work. So that maybe you (the viewer) pick on the suicide bomber, but at the same time it doesn't quite fit with Morris dancer or with the scale. There are things to keep contradicting it so you are never quite sure what you are looking at.

DL: We were talking before, Laura, about your interest in psychoanalysis and your experience of undergoing psychoanalysis, and I am wondering to what extent you would see an analogy with the experience of these works - particularly when, as we were saying earlier, one experiences them in a complex installation where they trigger off very early memories, perhaps of one's relationships to parents, and ambiguous and ambivalent kinds of emotions of love and hate that are inevitably bound up with that. Would you see any analogy?

LF: One of my most liberating experiences in analysis occurred when I was going through a particularly bad patch with my work. We had spent maybe three quarters of an hour analysing this particular drawing when the analyst turned to me and said: 'but it could mean anything though.' It was incredibly liberating for me to know that; it meant that everything doesn't have to be closed down. I think it was a period when Mary Kelly reigned supreme, where everything had a neat conceptual meaning, and that just

completely exploded it for me. It was just great. You can focus on these things, you can talk about them, you can bring meaning to these things but at the same time it can turn them upside down and open it up to all sorts of things that you don't know yet.

DL: So each viewer in a sense is allowed to bring their own personal associations to the experience of the work?

LF: Yes, very much so, and the space also alters them. If these were shown somewhere else you might have a completely different experience with them.

DL: Is it just coincidental that these recent works, in terms of their resonances, seem to connect so directly with the shocking images from Abu Graib jail that have been dominating headlines for the past week?

LF: It's not a coincidence. When I was making them it was the countdown to war in Iraq and there was a fever pitch in the newspapers. Everything you read somehow indicated there were going to be bombs, that war was inevitable. It was a time when there were bits of powder floating about in people's mail and everyone was getting completely paranoid about it. There was a sense that these were linked to terrorists who could have been anywhere. It had become quite surreal the whole thing, so it was a direct response to the times we are living in.

DL: Do you think children will continue to be the vehicle through which you will



articulate your views about the world we live in?

LF: Well, no, they are changing into these bearded ladies at the moment, these very angry, absolutely enormous, bearded ladies. I am not really sure where that is going but the figure who sits in the middle of them is very large. She has these two very large sticks covered in bells and a very large beard which is actually made out of soft furnishing.

DL: I found myself thinking about the two new warrior figures called *Some Mother's Sons*. Reflecting on the title, you seem to be saying that it is not by getting rid of all the George Bushes, or men in general, that everything would be solved. The maternal figure seems somehow implicated as well. You disrupt conventional stereotypes - *Bang Bang* the sweet little art terrorist for instance – but also refuse to see things in unambiguous black and white terms. Perhaps you are suggesting that our tendency to see things in absolutist terms is part of the problem?

LF: In the early feminist years, there were a lot of conferences I used to go to and there were lots of discussions around how you depict women - that you should never really depict them in a negative light and politically it would be unwise to do that. I remember there being lots of drawings of very happy fat women; they could never be skinny at the time! It was these kind of fantasy 'lovely lovely' women, and if men were not in the world it would all be okay. But actually you knew that we get rages

and destructive urges but at the time it was not allowed to be talked about. I remember seeing a Jenny Holzer show and I had never really liked her work much but she had just had a child and she had filled this pavilion with granite so it looked like this great big mausoleum and there were lots of things carved into the granite and then a lot of her light works on top of this granite. It was incredibly powerful because it was all about protecting the child in a sense, but also it was incredibly aggressive. I haven't seen *Kill Bill 2* yet but I imagine a pregnant woman with a vengeance is the scariest thing alive. The idea of a calm maternal figure is actually not part of my experience. You become passionately protective and you have this kind of fury and that was what was so powerful about the Jenny Holzer work.

DL: I am happy to open things out now to questions that people might have or else we could move to the galleries.

Audience: I just wanted to know to what extent you think maternal instinct has dominated your work as a female artist?

LF: Well, a lot. My work has always been about what is happening in my life and I have three children so it is an important factor.

Audience: [Inaudible]

LF: No, it is to do with time management. I am paying someone to look after the children so when I am in the studio it is incredibly focused. It might only be for



three hours or something but I get more done in those three hours than I might have done in a week prior to having children. One thing that has really changed is that you spend so much time sitting around in sandpits or wandering around shopping centres or John Lewis or something. There is a lot of aimless time with children where you find yourself staring at a pigeon and talking about a pigeon for half an hour or something. That has been incredibly good for the work because I have gone into the studio and done something and had to leave it, gone back out and thought 'That is what I should do with the work,' whereas if I had been in the studio the whole time I would have forced it into something. So in a way, real life has come into the work more and more and I think it has been very beneficial. I may have to borrow kids once mine grow up.

Audience: You talked about wishing to avoid narrative but there seem to be allusions to children's nursery stories in a number of the works.

LF: I think they start to feel as though they are narratives but the narratives break down. They never really go anywhere.

DL: It certainly seems to be one of the string of associations that so many of these pieces evoke, the *Elephant Boys* for example. You talked about your travels in India and seeing statues of Hindu gods, but at the same time one is also reminded of *Babar the Elephant*.

LF: Yes, and *Rupert the Bear* and other figures. People keep on saying to me that they are so weird, and I always think: pick up a *Rupert the Bear* book. How weird is that? A lot of it is just to do with context. Also I have very early memories of working on my dad's bingo. It was a prize bingo and for half wins you could win these terrible kitsch ornaments which I grew to love because basically they were lumps of plaster with a beautiful lady kind of painted on and yet people treasured them as if they were the real thing. I am quite interested in what we are expecting to see and what we project there.

DL: And the element of 'make believe' in children's play which the practice of installation once again seems to rely upon?

LF: Yes. The interesting thing about sculpture is it could be a dog but it is also just a lump of plaster. I like that materiality because it stops the work from being just purely a narrative - the sheer physicality of it.

Audience: [Inaudible]

LF: I really do not set out to make images that shock and, anyway, lately I have been trying to make things that are more saleable. But then again I have been making these bearded ladies so there must be a rebellious streak in me. I was looking at Maurizio Cattelan's little boys hanging from nooses that have just been taken down in Milan and I would feel very ambivalent about making work like that.



They are genuinely very shocking, although nothing is *actually* happening to them; it is all fantasy. Whereas Jake and Dinos Chapman's work, I find that I absorb it too readily, kind of going 'okay...' Their images are not shocking for me, they do not affect me emotionally to the same degree.

Audience: You know the bearded lady, it struck me that maybe with society and the changes of a man's role in society, as women have progressed, men have become more and more effeminate, so could the bearded lady really be a man as a woman in disguise?

LF: No, this really is me at 6 o'clock! There are a lot of male elements in them though.

DL: Thank you very much Laura.

