

Laura Ford represented Wales at the Venice Biennale in 2005. She recently worked at the University of Glamorgan print workshop on an etching for the Contemporary Art Society for Wales anniversary portfolio and Gregynog book, 2008, edited by Tony Curtis, who talked to her about her work.

LAURA FORD INTERVIEW

TC- I'm delighted to welcome you back to Wales to create some new works: a return to your roots.

LF- Well, I was born in Cardiff, then brought up in Porthcawl. My mother left my father immediately after I was born and we lived with my grandparents for a few years until my mum re-married and then we moved to Porthcawl. I come back to visit my family regularly.

T- You went to St Clare's School there. Did girls from St. Clare's go to art college?

L- No. But, actually, Jane Simpson, who is a good artist, who I taught at Chelsea, came from St Clare's a couple of years behind me. Education was slightly different for girls in those days: if you were academic you got an education, and if you weren't you got taught how to be a good wife. And somehow I missed both (Laughs).

T- Though you are "academic" aren't you? You're a thinker.

L- But I think I got my education once I left school. I suddenly realised that it was worth having.

T- You didn't start off as a sculptor, did you?

L- No, I was desperate to get out of school and I went to boarding school – it was going to be two years of sixth form - `it was near Bath.

T- That sounds posh – ponies and...

L- Yes, it was posh, a completely different world. Full of people whose parents were in the army or lived in Hong Kong, that sort of thing. I did A Levels early and applied to St Martins to do fashion design, but didn't get a place – I was too young – but I applied to Corsham and got a place at Bath Academy. I did the foundation course and started doing sculpture and realised it was great.

T- What sort of things were you making?

L - Well, on Foundation I was making all sorts of funny little wooden things.

T- Were you carving, or assembling?

L- A bit of everything – collage and all sorts of things. there's clearly the influence of someone like Joseph Beuys – the use of unconventional materials, and found materials.

L- Yes, but I think that was intuitive, because I knew nothing about art, to be honest, nothing at all.

T- No art history background – it often isn't taught very well is it?

L- Well, it just never occurred to me – in Porthcawl the only modern, contemporary artist I knew was David Hockney. And it never occurred to me to research any further.

T- So you were interested in the materials and making things, rather than a particular, pre-existing approach. You were making it up. Was that risky? I suppose if you didn't know anything then you weren't risking anything?

L- Exactly, I was just having fun, though the college were slightly frustrated by me. I learnt about Beuys and Niki de Saint Falle quite a bit later.

T- And did that then validate what you had been doing?

L- It would have been interesting to have known of those artists earlier, but at the time it was heavy metal and bulk –

T- Anthony Caro and Dave Smith?

L- David Smith specifically. I had no idea what it was about – I had no idea about sculpture in a formal way.

T- Though they too were working in a non-traditional way – works off the plinth, using non-traditional metals, a cruder metal than bronze – very macho stuff.

L- Very macho and also, I think, it was quite difficult for me. There were no other female tutors. It was all male and so I spent most of the first two years being on the edge of being chucked out for the kind of work I was making – I was making transvestite cowboys and things like that. It wasn't great work, but also, if you want to re-direct someone like me, you don't re-direct them to Caro and talk about formal things. I was a problem. They tried me in the painting department and they tried me in the print room, the ceramics area. I got moved around a lot because I didn't fit into any particular way of working.

T- But the transvestite cowboy obviously links up to your current career which is based on dressing up, in a sense, but also in narrative: transvestite cowboys has quite a narrative going on.

L- Things got better for new sculptors because there was that explosion with the show of young sculptors at the ICA and we started getting people like Anish Kapoor and Richard Deacon and Nick Pope and Anthony Gormley teaching – all men again – but they were younger and sympathetic to what I was doing.

T- Sometimes Barbara Hepworth is talked of almost as an adjunct to Henry Moore. She's a radically interesting artist, isn't she? But Hepworth was dead and there wasn't a British woman sculptor as a role model, was there?

L- No, but there were people like Shelagh Cluette Who was one of the first women to run an MA Course – she had been at Chelsea for a long time – and there were women starting to make their names.

T- But there wasn't a canon as such. Is there now?

L - Oh, I think yes. It is completely different.

T- What was your graduation show like?

L- It was in 1982. There was a spotty dog with its head twisted around, with this rather gorgeous arse, looking at you looking at it. There was a big pink, carved pig on tiny totters. One of the pieces was painted plaster to look like bronze, which later became bronze; one of them was carved elm, then painted. Those two were shown later at the Haywood/Serpentine sculpture show that happened when I was on the MA.

T- That's a strong, successful start.

L- Yes, from very dodgy beginnings. And I was picked up by the Nicola Jacobs gallery a little later on. One of the hottest galleries in Cork Street – I did a show with her, but nothing really came of it.

T- So, how does a sculptor get by? Did you start teaching right away?

L- Yes, luckily people like had been demanding female teachers at art school, so I was teaching all over the place – I travelled up to Sheffield as a part-time teacher for ages, taught at Camberwell, Chelsea and Middlesex among other places and had a studio in London.

But not so long after I had left Chelsea, when everything was going very well for me, I had a year off. Andrew and I went off to India and travelled extensively on a motor bike which meant I was a bit off track career wise once I got back,

T- That wasn't just a "gap" year. You both had to refresh what you were doing professionally? And your husband was working as a sculptor too. But wasn't it depressing, India – all that poverty?

L- No, it is fantastically rich in terms of culture.

T - I can see that your elephant imagery comes from there and the glitziness of decoration.

L- That's what I loved about it – all the sculptures there are fantastically carved, beautiful things. And then they are all dressed up, and loved, and brought to life.

T- In people's homes as well as public places.

L- But in the temples especially.

T- Art galleries could be our Sunday temples now. Taking off like that's a wild thing to do, hippy-ish. I suppose you have to do that before you have kids?

L- Yes, I was a little bit of a hippy.

T- But when you and Andrew were there, were you sketching, or taking photographs.

L- No, I don't think we did any art at all. But we did go and visit art schools and that was a way to make connections with art inside their society. And occasionally we'd do a talk and earn some money. We made some long lasting friends.

T- But why India? The gap year now means Sydney, doesn't it?

L- I had always been fascinated by Indian paintings and sculptures.

T- And that links up with your early memories of the fairground life – the lady painted in gold, covered in rats and bearded women and those freak show things.

L- Yes, but I think also that I wanted to go to a place where everything you had been taught about the world was looked at from a completely different angle. You suddenly saw everything you took for granted, to be true or to be right, turned completely on its head – a different approach to life, so you could look back at everything and see it in a different way, and question your assumptions.

T- But there are precedents for this, that experience could mess with your mind; because there are levels of poverty and a depth of wide-spread poverty that you can't do anything about.

L- But India isn't all like that.

T- Still, one could disappear into the darkness of those continents – “Mista Kurtz – he dead.”

L- But you can see darkness in your own country. I had been in a convent school for long periods, - though not having religious parents – and India showed me what the basis of another country was built on, the way they understand the world.

T- Duncan McLaren, who writes in your catalogue for the “Armour Boys” show makes much of the Britishness, the male Britishness which you are addressing – Scott of the Antarctic and that heroism, the work of Kipling. If you scratch many of us still you find that innate feeling that we British really are God's chosen. And that we really can go in and sort out other nations. And that is problematic – we are currently celebrating the anniversary of the independence of the Indian sub-continent and the

partition – the horrors of India and Pakistan spitting, for which we British were culpable. Are you political?

L- I am, yes, but not in an agit-prop way. When I was at college I was quite involved with the whole Greenham Common protest. I didn't live at that camp, but I used to go and stay there. I always found it impossible to make art about politics in a straightforward way.

T- Some years ago I visited Josef Herman in Highgate and saw in his studio a huge black canvas: he explained that it had been his painting of the Greenham Common women, but that he had decided finally to paint over it. It was too direct, perhaps too unsubtle.

Your *Chintz Girls* (1998-2000) and the *Boystory* pieces (2001) are deconstructing some myths about maleness and exploring the Scott tradition.

L- Yes, but they are also about the homeless in Kentish Town.

T- I find *Kipper* (2001) very moving in that respect. And *Beast* (2005) which we saw at the Glynn Vivian earlier this year is a sort of down and out lion.

L- Yes, but it's not even that: it's an emasculated lion sitting on a chair. It's a cross between the murdered hostage Ken Bigley and the lion from the *Wizard of Oz*. It's those two connotations and also it's like a depressed person as well. There's a bit in the David Lynch movie *Mulholland Drive* where they see this figure, which I read as a kind of god figure as a homeless person and when you look into his face you die. So there's an element of terror – of oppression, of emasculation. Like those Abu Graib prison inmates: if you don't watch people, how cruel they can become. That's what interests me.

T- So you can create a piece and then, in a sense, it is mediated by events in the news. So the resonance of the piece changes.
I can't recall any face on your figures.

L- There are in the new works though, the Beatrix Potter ones. They are sort of animal faces, they're blind, a bit like when you see homeless people and they never look straight at you. There's that feeling that they pretend not to be there but at the same time they inhabit the same space.

T- Is it for us the viewer to add the face?

L- Yes, the problem is when you have face, and the Beast sort of has face, that you give them characters, and I'm not very happy about that. I don't want them to be read narratively.

T- But if you have a group, an assemblage such as the Chintz Girls or the Sleepwalkers (2005) that is a narrative. One asks why are they there; why have they got this pyjama-concentration camp dress?

L- But there is no story being told. I think that the story breaks down, it collapses on itself,

T- So you want to occupy that space between a closed off narrative, or a sequential narrative, and confusing the viewer.

L- I want them to feel things and start thinking about what those feelings are about.

T -Your Sleepwalkers reminds me of the John Singer Sargeant painting of the column of blind soldiers in the Imperial War Museum, "Gassed".

L- Well, Sleepwalkers came from a scene of Palestinian prisoners being led away by an Israeli soldier, all blind-folded, stumbling around. And subsequently I've seen that image from pictures of wars all over the world. That piece was shown in East Germany, just outside Berlin and of course people read it as a kind of Nazi concentration camp uniform. But it wasn't specifically a piece made for Germany, it was made before. It had been in my mind and when I got this opportunity I thought it was perfect. Because the space had also been a GDR children's home. So it also references Peter Pan. There's something sweet about that. They are not miserable pyjamas, apart from the sleeves being too long. They are not soiled, they are crisp.

T- Are they adult sized figures?

L- No, they are around the size of eleven-year olds. So, depending on your political persuasion, you could read it is lots of ways; those conflicts are the same all over, it's man's inhumanity to man. That's what I'm interested in and the way it gets played out. Contemporary events, the news, feeds into what I'm doing.

T- Can we talk about Armour Boys (2005-6) which is your most recent work, and which I think is very powerful?

L- That came about from being in London during all the bombings; it was about feeling vulnerable. That thing of knowing that you can't ever protect your children completely; and then having a residency up in the Scottish Sculpture Workshop and seeing suits of armour there: a sort of glorification of war and at the same time a sadness.

T- It's a bit like those gasmasks for babies in the Second world war, and , of course, there would be children's masks in modern war, just as there had been children's armour, wouldn't there? Both sensible and depressing. And there is that moment before plane flight when they explain that the safely procedure is to put on your own mask first if the oxygen should fail.

L- Yes, when we fly that always freaks my son out and we have to have long conversations about that. Armour Boys was also about my role as a mother making those suits and enacting your own worst fears. And that's quite often what I do in the studio.

T- You say that you and your husband occupy an old piano factory and that you work in the basement – but, in a way, the work is pretty X-certificate stuff. The kids come in from school and get plaster on their blazers, but does it concern you that the work affects them in more profound ways?

L- They just ask me why I make such miserable work.

T- Still, the Chintz Girls can be read as being less bizarre than, well, *Baby Ballroom* on tv where these plaster- cast kids nearly cry, but they've been told not to even if they fail to get through to the next round. So your Chintz Girls are less disturbing than reality tv. But the Armour Boys and dead and wounded aren't they?

L- They are. They're down, like the figures in Pompeii or the bog- man. They have a fossilised quality. They're not dead children. I don't want to make a piece that is obviously and instantly shocking, because I think that your audience closes down and stops feeling at that point. I think it wants to just seep into your consciousness that there is something far worse. I don't know whether I want to change people's minds either.

T - Though you do want to take them to new experiences, to change them, though not with an agenda. Because the armour distances us from them; makes them a period, historical experience.

L- Yes, it's like a classical thing.

T- And in Shakespeare there are children killed, murdered as necessary to the plot.

L- I was thinking child soldiers as well. I had lots of images, pinned up in the studio of child soldiers. You can see because children don't develop full awareness of their actions until much later, these people use children, because they feel invulnerable, so I think that interested me.

T- Do your children have a direct effect on your work, do they influence it by their reactions.

L- No. But they do have favourites. There's one I've made recently which is half-girl, half-bird and it's their favourite one, for some reason. They call it "the bird god". Sometimes ideas and titles come from drawing with the children or talking with them.

T- I saw some of the Bunny Boys recently at the Houldsworth, your gallery in London,

L- They came out of the suicide bomber series I did at the Beaconsfield show in London. I had a huge, bearded woman with Morris dancers called Wreckers (2004); she was surrounded by little figures - some of them were bunnies and some of them were Morris dancers and it was as if they had come out of Sherwood Forest.

T- Yes, I remember, she was a wicked witch, a larger, dominating figure: and they were victims, or witnesses, or assistants to her?

L- Well, that was up to you. It was almost as if they'd come out of Pandora's Box.

T- And much earlier you had the girl figure with the gun, Bang, bang (1996).

L- That was more to do with looking and being looked at, some feminist thinking that was current then.

T- And you often want to deconstruct the gallery in that you delight in placing figures in unusual places: the elephant Boy who's in a corner of the stately home.

And the ass's head, is that referencing *Midsummer Night's Dream*?

L- Yes, that came from a combination of things: I had said that I would do a show in a commercial gallery and I was quite tired at the time – I had three young children - and I'd been doing lots of other shows as well. And I started thinking about commercial spaces and things to say and things to display. I'd been looking at lots of shows around, so I'd seen installations in commercial galleries. But there was almost a feeling that they were pretending that it wasn't a commercial gallery and somehow that none of that matters. I felt slightly uncomfortable with that.

T- It's an issue with sculpture: I mean, if you can't live with something in your house do you need a gallery in the garden? I realise some rich collectors do. So you don't expect people to come along to the gallery and order three stags and two hunters...

L- No, but when I had the show in Camden I sold some massive works – the giraffe for instance, the Arts Council purchased it and it's been all around the country.

T- The first piece I saw of yours was the *Stilt Boy* (2001) which Michael Tooby bought for the National Museum in Cardiff. I suppose it will usually be institutions acquiring the work. But when you produce a print, that can be aimed at the collector.

L- I haven't done many and these I'm working on at Glamorgan are the first for a few years. It's to do with no having the facilities for print-making, I have the convenience of my studio downstairs at the house. But I do plan to do a set of new prints with Houldsworth Gallery, I joined them about six years ago and they have been very good to work with.

T- And you'd be happy to have a touring show that consisted of works hung on the wall. Because at the Glynn Vivian you showed *Beast* in front of two *Bunny* drawings on the back wall.

L- I probably would. I am going to be showing a series of drawings at Turner Contemporary, Margate: they have commissioned some works to go outside, but there's a wall in the indoor space we will be using where I'll be showing a set of drawings, based on the Beatrix Potter books. And they are quite a turning point, fine, academic looking drawings. I did lots of that in college.

T- And is that part of your practice: when you came to us today you had a number sketches, so does it all begin with a pencil?

L- No, it just depends; the *Headthinkers* (2003) did begin with a pencil and with other things it's just a bit of fabric, bringing together other stuff. I don't work in any set way.

T- Going round India and not even drawing anything, that requires a huge amount of confidence: how do you know that you will be able to start again?

L- Well, if you say to yourself that you have to start doing again, that would provide an awful lot of anxiety.

T- But if you don't make art then you lose your identity.

L- When I was at art school there was a lot of talk about there being no great female artist because their creative impulse being completely taken up with child bearing, child rearing and the minute you get a pram in the house all your creative juices dry up. Well, it was completely the opposite for me. And I found it very interesting, because I would have an hour or two hours in the studio, I used that fantastically well. And the rest of the time was spent observing life, observing things and that got brought back into the work. Without a life the work doesn't come. I think that before the kids my work was starting to get a bit too self-conscious and contrived.

T- Yes, children educate us, don't they? But there's also your reading. You're quite literary aren't you?

L- I like novels.

T- You like Beryl Bainbridge. And she writes about outsiders. Your explorer figures have been informed by her book *The Birthday Boys* which fictionalises the Scott expedition. They're often darkly comic. And you are darkly comic, or comically macabre. That's what you want, isn't it?

L- Yes, I can't help it, That's what I am.

T- There's that story of Jacob Epstein's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angels* that was rejected and ended up in a Toussard's travelling show. And eventually was bought back into the Tate. So that is your story in reverse. How does your family regard what you do now?

L- They think it's great.

T- But your childhood and the involvement with the fairground, the freak shows and so on, that is seriously weird.

L- But it's not though, is it? There'd be people coming off the shows to buy chips at my grandfather's later on. The gold-painted lady who sat in the glass tank full of rats, coming to buy chips in her hair rollers, became ordinary. People imagine it as being romantic, but it's just bloody hard work.

T- So that was part of your early life; like your kids coming down stairs now and seeing parents creating these things. It's very ordinary, it's just where I live and what my mum and dad do. It would be too easy to look back at that and see deep rooted working out of things.

L- I spent some time in Great Yarmouth last week and I just find it depressing now. Everything is there for a thrill or to take you away from what's mundane for a few seconds.

T- Just like an art gallery! It's very easy to take good black and white photographs of a run-down fairground. I live in Barry and the Island fair ground looks very run down.

L- Yes. My uncle used to sell balloons there. Fairs did used to have a function – cinemas and strip shows included.

T- Yes, William Haggart came out of that tradition and became an early, pioneering film maker in Wales and the west of England.

L- Well, it was the beginning of everything, where things were tried out, so all sorts of things emerged. I was at the tail-end of that. It's lost its function now. The fairground used to contain all those things that now, like Cirque Soleil, have separated out. My favourite one was the tableau one where you'd go into a booth thinking you were seeing the fixed sculpture of Frankenstein's monster and then he'd get up and chase you out of the booth. Even though you knew it would happen, you'd have this delicious moment of make-believe. In a sense I think I've borrowed quite a bit of that for my work.

T- When I visited Shani Rhys James to arrange her involvement in this print project she was working on dress-maker's dummies as automatons with movement and recorded voices. You've not considered that?

L- No, my works are definitely sculptures.

T- Do you use music at all?

L- No, though a few years ago I worked with a performance artist Annie Griffin who's a film maker now working in tv and film. I got to know her and we had similar ideas and did a couple of performances together. Sometimes I just made the sets and at other times we collaboratively made the show. They were built on improvisation and that was great, very interesting. The amount of stuff we brought out of those shows to work with later was plenty. Having music playing with Chintz Girls would be too much information. That stops the imagination.

T- You were talking about your next project, the Tree Girls at Roche Court in Wiltshire, opening towards the end of 2007, and how that informs the etching which you are doing at our workshop here.

L- They are tree figures my size which will stand against a wall.

T- That etching in progress has a figure which is somewhere between the sexual and the splayed, crucified tree. Your pieces are often asexual or pre-sexual, or ambiguously gendered, aren't they?

L- yes

T- And the other image is called "Something of the Night". It's a dark, male figure stumbling towards a female, innocent-happy sun. Where does that come from?

L- It came from a painting I made a while back, but I think the image works better in print as it seems to be more ambiguous and more dreamlike. The male figure is from an old black and white Jack the Ripper movie and he seems to be making his way across a snowy landscape that starts to look like sheets and pillows, toward a sleeping sun with her hair in rollers. Sweet dreams eh?